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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
NATIONAL FOOD STAMP CONVERSATION 2000
PUBLIC HEARING
JULY 27, 2000
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PANELISTS

MS. SHIRLEY WATKINS, CHAIR
USDA Under Secretary
Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services

MS. JULIA PARADIS
USDA Deputy Under Secretary
Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services

MR. TED BELL
Midwest Regional Administrator
Food and Nutrition Services

1 MS. WATKINS: Good afternoon. We just ask that
2 you take your seats and we'll be ready to begin.

3 I'm Shirley Watkins, the under secretary
4 for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services, with the
5 Department of Agriculture in Washington. I am
6 delighted to see all of you this afternoon. To
7 know that you're concerned about the food stamp
8 program and you're interested in the program, and
9 your mere presence here this afternoon indicates
10 your expressed interest in the food stamp program.
11 So it's a real pleasure to see all of you.

12 Some of you are friends from way back, and
13 new friends that we'll meet today. I hope you will
14 enjoy these as much as I have over the past few
15 weeks.

16 The first conversation we had in
17 Washington, the next one we had in Atlanta, and
18 last week we had one in New York. So here we are
19 today in Chicago expecting to hear lots of you add
20 to our interest in the program, as well as as we
21 move on to other regions of the country and listen
22 to other people.

23 I am delighted to be here because the food
24 stamp program is a cornerstone of our nutrition

1 assistance program at the Department of
2 Agriculture. And as we move into this new century,
3 we want to make sure that we're responsive and that
4 there is an appropriate time for everything. And
5 particularly, we think the timing is right for the
6 clients that we have that participate in these
7 programs.

8 We're here to listen to your conversations
9 and you'll have lots of them this afternoon. We
10 need your input and we value your input. It's
11 going to be critical to us that you be very frank,
12 open and honest with us in ways that you think that
13 we can enhance the program. This is perhaps for
14 many people the only way that they can survive.

15 Before we get underway and start listening
16 to your conversations, I want to take just a few
17 minutes to describe the food stamp program and kind
18 of tell you what some of the purposes are for these
19 conversations and the goals, and kind of tell you a
20 little bit about the history - and many of you know
21 more about the history than I do -- and just give
22 you a brief frame work about the conversations.
23 It's going to be an opportunity for us as well as
24 you.

1 The food stamp program had its beginnings
2 back in the Depression, and the original intent as
3 stated in the Food Stamp Act was to strengthen the
4 agriculture economy and achieve a more effective
5 use of the food. And to provide for improved
6 levels of nutrition among low income households.

7 And the program as we know it today began
8 as a project in 1961, and it was permanent. The
9 food stamp program was made permanent in 1964.

10 Then the program expanded dramatically
11 after 1974 when Congress required all of the states
12 to make food stamps available to low income
13 households. Then the Food Stamp Act of 1977 made
14 significant changes in the program. Regulations,
15 it tightened the eligibility criteria, and changed
16 some of the administration. It removed the
17 requirement that food stamps be purchase by
18 recipients.

19 And since then, the program has grown
20 reaching an all time high of almost 28 million
21 participants in March of 1994.

22 The current participation averages
23 somewhere around 17 to 20 million, so you're in the
24 17, 18, 20 million category per month.

1 Food stamp households are diverse. It's a
2 wide ranging group representing a broad cross
3 section of this Nation's low income population.

4 Let me just share with you what the food
5 stamp characteristics of households look like. And
6 you may be a bit surprised that over half of the
7 recipients are children, and another 8 percent are
8 age 60 and older.

9 The majority of the households do not
10 receive TANF benefits. They receive cash
11 assistance from SSI, Social Security, State General
12 Assistance. 9 percent of the food stamp recipients
13 have no income at all. Don't have any kind of
14 income.

15 26 percent of the recipients work. And
16 for these households, those earnings are the
17 primary source of the family income.

18 Only 10 percent of these working families
19 made enough to put them above the poverty line, and
20 37 percent are at or below the poverty line.

21 The average food stamp household has only
22 \$118 in accountable resources, including vehicles,
23 checking and savings accounts.

24 The average food stamp household is

1 small. It's around -- and I always laugh when I
2 say this -- 2.4 people. I don't know what that .4
3 is. However, the households with children are
4 relatively large. That's about 3.3 members in the
5 household. Households with elderly participants
6 are smaller, with an average size of about 1.3
7 members.

8 We recently hosted -- and some of you
9 perhaps already know if you check the web site of
10 USDA -- a national nutrition summit in Washington.
11 And that was at the end of May.

12 One of the things that we did was to plan
13 two sessions that would give us an idea as to what
14 kind of issues surround hunger in this country.

15 The first session was entitled, "The Face
16 of Hunger in America," and one of the panelists was
17 a Sharon Thornberry. She was a former WIC
18 recipient and a former food stamp recipient.

19 She had practically everybody in that room
20 in tears. One of the things she told us was that
21 these programs did not make her dependent, they
22 helped her to succeed. And for so long we thought
23 that the food stamp program and some of the other
24 wealthier programs made people dependent, and she

1 said that simply is not true.

2 She now is self-reliant, self-sufficient,
3 and is working a job and is doing quite well. But
4 she said she got her start from the food stamp
5 program.

6 Well, as I think about the discussions
7 that I've heard and the conversations that I've
8 heard, I know listening from some of the recipients
9 in the last conversation in New York that the
10 program did help many of these people to succeed
11 and many of them are doing quite well.

12 We will get a lot out of the conference
13 here today, and I know that what we hear will be a
14 key to help us make the right decisions to enhance
15 the program.

16 You perhaps received a handout as you came
17 in. If you didn't, please be sure to pick up the
18 folders, and I think that will give you a lot of
19 good information. But one of the things that we
20 did was to develop some principles and some
21 guidelines.

22 Julie Paradis, who is sitting to my right,
23 is the Deputy Under Secretary for Food Nutrition
24 and Consumer Services. Julie and I have wanted to

1 be sure that we knew what the guiding principles
2 were for the food stamp program. Sometimes you're
3 not certain, and I wanted to be sure that she and I
4 knew, as well as everybody else around this
5 country, and that we were all on the same page.

6 So we developed with the staff and
7 conversations with food stamp commissioners and in
8 food stamp directors around the country, we agreed
9 on what those principles were going to be.

10 When you take a look at these principles,
11 bear in mind that improved nutritional well-being
12 is the ultimate measure of success in the fight to
13 reduce hunger and improved nutrition.

14 This principle is the foundation and the
15 heart of the original intent of the framers who
16 developed the Food Stamp Act. And that's at the
17 core of why we're here today and why we want to
18 have these participations around the country and
19 have these series of discussions with you.

20 As we approach reauthorization for 2002,
21 we need to know what people are saying, what people
22 are thinking and what your ideas are, so as we work
23 to develop the frame work for reauthorization,
24 we'll know just what you said and we'll have all

1 these thoughts and ideas to work from as we try to
2 do this.

3 We want to be as responsive as we can to
4 people in this country, and be as responsive as we
5 can to those of you who not only work in the
6 program, but who are recipients of these program
7 services.

8 So since we want to get a lot of input
9 from a broad spectrum of people, it was necessary
10 for us to stretch ourselves and get on planes and
11 trains and buses and whatever, and trucks and cars,
12 whatever it takes to get there, and visit around
13 the country to find out what people are thinking.

14 So we're here to listen, and we want to
15 hear your ideas and your thoughts as to how we can
16 make this the best program possible for the people
17 in this country who need it the most.

18 We are going to kind of get things
19 underway, and I don't want to talk too much. I'm
20 going to ask Julie to kind of tell us what the
21 structure is going to be and how we're going to do
22 this, okay.

23 MS. PARADIS: I will just take one minute.

24 I'm delighted to be here with Shirley. I

1 have the great honor and privilege to be able to
2 come to some of these conversations, but not all of
3 them. I'm delighted to be back in Chicago and see
4 so many familiar faces out there.

5 Our vision statement at FNCS says we will
6 lead America in ending hunger and improving health
7 and nutrition. And I think it's kind of something
8 we ought to keep in mind here today. Because it
9 doesn't say "we will end hunger," it says, "we will
10 lead America in ending hunger." And you are the
11 America that that statement envisions.

12 So only by working with you can we make
13 that vision statement come true. And that's why
14 it's so important that you're here today. We are
15 really grateful as our partners in this horrific
16 fight that you're here to share with us your ideas
17 in terms of how to improve the program, our most
18 important first line of defense against hunger, and
19 that's the food stamp program. So thank you all
20 for being here.

21 Let me also take this opportunity to
22 introduce Ted Bell, our regional administrator here
23 in the region, and thank all his staff as well as
24 Catholic Charities for putting this whole afternoon

1 together. This is a terrific space. So thank you
2 very much for working with our regional people to
3 make this come together.

4 Now, as you know, those of you who are
5 interested in speaking this afternoon, we've asked
6 you to sign in and it's kind of first come, first
7 serve. So we've got a list here of folks that
8 signed up to present this afternoon, and Shirley
9 will call you kind of by number as we go along.

10 I think the thought is that we will take a
11 break somewhere between 3:00, 3:30, but I think
12 people will come and go as they need to.

13 The washrooms are at the back, so if you
14 need to use those any time before 3:00, please be
15 comfortable doing that.

16 I think it's going to be a very exciting
17 and interested afternoon and we are delighted we
18 are all here. Let's get started.

19 MS. WATKINS: Julie, thank you very much.

20 We have telephone services available, so
21 those people who couldn't come today could call
22 in. So we will listen to hear when we get a call
23 and we will pass those on.

24 I just need to tell you I will try to go

1 by the numbers that we have and the way you signed
2 up, but I may have to switch sometimes. So just
3 know you may get switched. So don't get too
4 frustrated with me if you think you're number six
5 and you start counting, you think I have skipped
6 over you and might have, but I will come back to
7 you.

8 MS. PARADIS: Let me remind people, too, we
9 will take any written comments. So any presenter
10 who wants to elaborate on their comments or if
11 anyone doesn't want to make an oral presentation up
12 here, you can submit comments. We will be taking
13 those up to the end of August. And I think there
14 is information in the material you got as you came
15 through the door on how to submit those comments in
16 writing.

17 MS. WATKINS: The other thing we would ask is
18 that you limit your comments between two to five
19 minutes. I don't want to have to cut you off, but
20 I may have to if you get too long-winded.

21 And I want to express my thanks, before
22 all of you start moving later on this evening to go
23 out that door, to especially thank Catholic
24 Charities and our region and all the staff who have

1 worked so hard to put this together. So we
2 appreciate you and thank you very much.

3 I'm just reading this. "Catholic
4 Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago, Compassion
5 In Action." I don't know if I should say anything
6 else about that, but it certainly fits what we are
7 going to be doing here today.

8 I will ask you to repeat your name,
9 because these sessions are being transcribed so we
10 will have all of this. So please repeat your name
11 because I may get it wrong. I won't do it
12 intentionally, it's just that I may. So thank you
13 in advance for that.

14 Let's start off with Jeff Rumachik.

15 MR. RUMACHIK: Thank you. My name is Jeff
16 Rumachik with the Food Marketing Institute.

17 Food Marketing Institute is a trade
18 association. It's based out of Washington D.C.,
19 representing the retail and wholesale food industry
20 from the smallest local grocer to the largest
21 chains we have as members.

22 I know you have had a lot of conversation
23 with food marketing institutes, so I won't be
24 redundant. Just to focus on a couple of things.

1 As you know, Food Marketing Institute has
2 been involved in ABD since its earliest inception
3 and we work closely with all the partners in the
4 process to try to make sure that our members and
5 ultimately the recipients have the smoothest
6 process available.

7 Citibank, as you know, is the primary
8 processor of benefits to most of the states, and
9 our concern is with the problems that have occurred
10 recently, specifically since Deluxe has exited and
11 EDS has been partnered now with Citibank.

12 It seems like since that time problems
13 have multiplied since EDS has entered the benefit
14 processing process, specifically the large scale
15 downtime periods.

16 The most serious issue in these downtime
17 periods are the time out of reversals, slash,
18 adjustments and emergency vouchers.

19 The time out reversals are when the system
20 is either down or stressed. And imagine someone
21 standing at the check out and they have all the
22 these groceries and communication is trying to take
23 place and for some reason it either takes too long
24 and it's timed out, or the system is down and

1 ultimately the transaction is declined. Not only
2 does the grocer lose the sale, but more important
3 the recipient loses access to those benefits.
4 Because the transmission can actually go through
5 and charge the account or debit the account of the
6 recipient, and when the adjustment happens it can
7 take our members up to 45 days to make the
8 adjustment in that process.

9 So we are concerned about not only the
10 outages, but that time out or the time it takes to
11 communicate with the system to have the benefit or
12 the transaction actually take place.

13 During those outages, our members tell us
14 that the voice authorization toll-free number has
15 not been available and they have been told they're
16 not authorized to use emergency vouchers.

17 So we would ask three things. That the
18 cause of the outages be identified and corrected.

19 Second, to insure that the toll-free voice
20 authorization line is able to accommodate the
21 number of calls it receives during these outages.

22 And third, to authorize the use of the
23 emergency vouchers in all cases when the voice
24 authorization is not available.

1 Thank you.

2 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

3 Tim Drea.

4 MR. DREA: Very good, Madam Secretary. Not
5 very many people get that right. It is Tim Drea,
6 D-r-e-a.

7 It's been a great conversation so far.

8 I here with the Commercial Workers of
9 Illinois. We are a union of 60,000 people, and we
10 are -- the overwhelming majority of our workers
11 work in food processing and food retailing. So we
12 thank you for the opportunity. Certainly with the
13 farmers of the United States, we help feed
14 America's people. I will be very, very brief.

15 We are opposed to the proposal to remove
16 the protections that are intended to insure
17 families who are living on tax assistance programs
18 as well as families who we believe that we want
19 them to keep their benefits under the food stamp
20 program.

21 And we believe that because families just
22 moving off of the welfare rolls into work should
23 not have to move into work because -- or stay on
24 welfare because they are going to lose benefits.

1 We further oppose the second to the rule,
2 that would jeopardize access to the food stamp
3 program by all legal immigrants and assistance to
4 children. And we do so because we want to keep
5 support in food marketing and our employers, we
6 want to keep stores open in neighbors that they are
7 closing up because of the low sales.

8 We believe that not having full access to
9 the food stamp program makes it harder for our
10 employers, and in fact our employees, to maintained
11 a profitable business.

12 So if there are any questions we would be
13 more than happy to answer those.

14 MS. WATKINS: Thank you so much.

15 Rick Zynda.

16 MR. ZYNDA: Good afternoon, under secretary,
17 Ms. Paradis and Mr. Bell.

18 I'm here representing the State of
19 Wisconsin, the Department of Health -- no that's my
20 old profession. The Department of Workforce
21 Development. My name is Rick Zynda and I'm the
22 director of the Office of Food Stamps and Medical
23 Assistance in the Department.

24 Thank you for the opportunity provided us

1 to discuss firsthand how the food stamp program is
2 working at the state and the local level, and to
3 suggest some ideas on how to help increase program
4 participation and administrate some better customer
5 service.

6 Many agree that the food stamp program is
7 at a critical crossroads since the advent of the
8 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and
9 Reconciliation Act of 1996, WORA, and TANF, which I
10 won't spell out. I think we know what that is.

11 Dramatic numbers of clients have moved off of cash
12 assistance and have found and retained employment.

13 Less than 7,000 families now receive cash
14 assistance in Wisconsin under Wisconsin Works, or
15 W2.

16 As welfare reform has progressed, in order
17 for families to re-enter and remain in the
18 workforce and maximize their independence, they
19 need key supportive services. Particularly food
20 security, health care, and child care.

21 In Wisconsin we have been able to extend
22 health care benefits to low income families through
23 a state and federal partnership called Vandacare
24 (phonetic). We have also been able to secure and

1 streamline federal matching funds to state funds to
2 expand child care greatly.

3 However, the food stamp program hasn't
4 kept pace with those other key programs. Policies
5 have become more complex and more error prone, and
6 people have entered the workforce with fluctuating
7 income and expenses which complicate the food stamp
8 eligibility determination. The program has just
9 become more complicated as people enter the
10 workforce and try to become independent.

11 Some of the examples that are complex are
12 face-to-face interviews, verification and
13 documentation of volumes of data, frequency of
14 reporting changes in household circumstances, and
15 frequency of redetermining eligibility.

16 This is considered by most applicants that
17 we talk to, to be a, quote, hassle, to be able to
18 be in the program.

19 In Wisconsin where employment
20 opportunities are at an all-time high, many who
21 could qualify for the program chose not to apply
22 for these reasons.

23 The same complexities effect the
24 participation of the elderly population as well.

1 In addition, the income and assets limits of food
2 stamp eligibility has not kept pace with the other
3 supportive services program.

4 For instance, our Medicaid Vandicare and
5 child care programs are at a level or have
6 eligibility limits of 185 percent of the poverty
7 level. And then once eligible, can stay on to the
8 200 percent of the poverty level. Whereas food
9 stamps is 130 percent gross income and 100 percent
10 net income.

11 Finally, the food stamp benefits amounts
12 for many program participants are minimal. A
13 recent study by our state's legislative bureau
14 pointed out that 29 percent of our eligible
15 households received \$10 or less in benefits, and 40
16 percent receive \$50 or less in benefits.

17 Those are large numbers at low benefit
18 amounts. Many of the people are on fixed incomes
19 or are the working poor.

20 The federal formula calculating the
21 benefits rapidly phases out food stamps for those
22 who have increases in earnings, and this may
23 explain the increasing reliance on alternate food
24 sources such as food pantries because of the

1 availability and means of getting those benefits
2 which outweigh the complicated process of the food
3 stamp program.

4 What do we recommend for changes? We
5 suggest things such as the simplified application
6 process, including eliminating the requirement for
7 face-to-face interviews by a government employee,
8 with reduction in the amount of information
9 required to verify eligibility through standardized
10 deductions.

11 Increased income levels to qualify and
12 remain eligible. Allow states to match those
13 levels with some of the other supportive services
14 program.

15 Increased asset levels. Particularly
16 allow people to own at least one vehicle of any
17 value to get to work or get training or obtain
18 medical care.

19 Increase the minimum benefit from the \$10
20 minimum currently to at least \$25 per month.

21 Determine a new formula for establishing
22 benefit amounts. One that doesn't change for every
23 dollar in income change, such as a range of income
24 levels similar to tax tables.

1 Coordinate policies with other programs
2 administered by USDA, such as WIC, school breakfast
3 and lunch and temporary food service programs,
4 which have much simpler, much less complicated
5 eligibility processes.

6 And development of policies that are
7 consistent with other supportive services programs,
8 such as with HCFA and the medicaid program. And
9 HCFA has emphasized simplification and reduced many
10 qualifications, even though the benefits paid out
11 in that program are much more.

12 And then finally, a quality assurance
13 program that measures states on more than just a
14 dollar-for-dollar accuracy level, but also gives
15 credit for things such as customer service,
16 customer access. Those things that we are trying
17 to do to bring people back into the program or
18 under the program. Give us some credit by some
19 offset for the error rate for that is something
20 we'd like to see.

21 I think I will stop at that. There are a
22 couple other things that I skipped over in the
23 interest of time.

24 But we thank you again for coming to the

1 Midwest and look forward to working with you on
2 reauthorization in 2002.

3 MS. WATKINS: Thank you very much.
4 Brian Kibble-Smith.

5 MR. KIBBLE-SMITH: Thank you. For the
6 record, I am Brian Kibble-Smith, a vice-president
7 of Chicago based EBT Contractors, Citicorp
8 Services.

9 To clarify a point made earlier, the EBT
10 projects referenced are indeed the projects of our
11 company, though we indeed work through our
12 affiliates, Citibank, in some states.

13 Under the regulatory supervision of USDA
14 through Nutrition Service, Citicorp's EBT projects
15 support approximately five million households
16 receiving program benefits in environments as
17 diverse as Brooklyn, New York, and Alaska's
18 Aleutian Islands.

19 In a given month, Citicorp projects
20 handled over 30 million transactions and move over
21 \$900 million in government program funds, using the
22 same electronic funds transfer, or EFT, networks
23 that serve millions of consumers every day.

24 EBT has enabled the financial mainstream

1 of many families, individuals, as well as retail
2 grocers who prior to EBT had not been active
3 participants in that emerging part of the economy.

4 EBT also provides agencies with far
5 greater management information capabilities.

6 MS. WATKINS: Brian, you may want to step back
7 just a bit.

8 MR. KIBBLE-SMITH: Sorry.

9 Four of the five states that FNS has
10 recently cited as making most effective use of EBT
11 information in prevention of program fraud are
12 Citicorp clients.

13 While the food stamp program accounts for
14 the largest share, Citicorp also processes
15 transactions for many other programs. These
16 include TANF, federal payments such as Social
17 Security, third party child care benefits, and even
18 assistance to victims of large scale natural
19 disasters.

20 EBT, however, is a challenging financial
21 environment. EBT contractors invested large
22 amounts of capital in the early years of the
23 project expecting to recoup costs and realize
24 profits from the processing of monthly welfare

1 caseloads over several years.

2 When the first EBT contract procurement
3 took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s,
4 contractors were required to calculate the price of
5 using government-provided bonding data based on
6 decades of experience with caseloads that varied
7 moderately due to economic cycles.

8 The weighing of state and federal welfare
9 reform activity in the mid-1990s abruptly changed
10 this pattern by drastically reducing caseloads.

11 Though this was socially beneficial, EBT
12 contractors found it difficult to recover their
13 fixed cost and increasingly promoted EBT as a means
14 to deliver multiple services to offset the lost
15 volume.

16 In addition, Citicorp has improved
17 internal processes and introduced greater economies
18 of scale so that our company could continue to
19 respond to customer needs and maintain its status
20 as a reliable provider.

21 Going forward, we expect increased
22 competition for the projects as bids based on
23 caseloads as directly reflects welfare reform
24 replace older contracts.

1 For ten years Citicorp's EBT systems have
2 performed with nearly 100 percent reliability. EBT
3 transaction, however, travel the same system used
4 by businesses and consumers, including the real
5 world obstacles that commercial transactions face
6 every day.

7 This past Monday, July 24, is an example.
8 A company that provides third-party processing
9 services to retailers experienced internal
10 difficulties that slowed its operations in two
11 states. Citicorp system and all of the systems of
12 our vendors and subcontractors were fully
13 functional, but the inability of some retailers to
14 send a small number of transactions through this
15 processing company was misinterpreted as an EBT
16 failure.

17 The nature of commercial EBT requires all
18 participant systems to perform correctly to
19 complete the transaction. This includes the
20 terminal provider, the retailer's internal system
21 or external processor, local and long distance
22 telephone service and others, before the
23 transaction is even delivered to the system for
24 authorization.

1 Citicorp understands recent concerns over
2 the EBT reliability due to technological issues
3 involved in our change in vendors for certain
4 processing services. These issues are
5 transitional, and as necessary we are working
6 diligently to resolve them.

7 No matter how stable the EBT processes is,
8 however, EBT transactions will be subject to the
9 same variables that can impact any consumer's
10 ability to use a debt card or credit card to pay
11 for a purchase.

12 In conclusion, financial hydration from
13 EBT is rapidly approaching completion. EBT is a
14 successful extension of prudent technology to
15 government processes and to a community previously
16 underserved by the emergent electronic economy.

17 Viewed in this context, Citicorp trusts
18 that EBT is an asset to FNS in its important
19 mission. And thank you for this opportunity to
20 speak.

21 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

22 Alan Blackford.

23 MR. BLACKFORD: Thank you. I'm Alan
24 Blackford. I work for Supervalu out in the

1 Midwest region in Kenosha, Wisconsin. I would like
2 to share just a few comments and try not to be
3 redundant with those comments as others have
4 stated.

5 My perspective here today is relating to
6 the system issues and how those effect those
7 recipients of the food stamp program.

8 You've heard from several people already
9 relative to some of the transitional issues
10 relating to those using an EBT card, but I would
11 like to perhaps look at it from a little bit
12 different perspective, and that is from the
13 perspective of the recipients while they are doing
14 a transaction at a store location.

15 We provide technology services to many
16 independent retailers, and with that one of my
17 responsibilities is getting feedback on those
18 particular systems.

19 Let me share with you just a couple of
20 things relative to electronic benefit and the
21 transactions at the store.

22 What is happening today is that we are
23 having an extreme number of -- what I would
24 classify an extreme number of outages currently

1 with EDS, which is contracted through Citibank or
2 Citicorp, and those particular outages effect the
3 recipient in a variety of ways. And we need to
4 make sure we understand that as we look forward, as
5 we look into the future for ways to enhance the
6 program that we have today.

7 As an example, today as a recipient walks
8 into a store and there is in fact an outage, that
9 person is then at the store, they're instructed to
10 use the 1-800 number to go through a voucher
11 procedure. As was mentioned earlier, there is not
12 sufficient 1-800 coverage. The lines are busy.
13 Our retailers cannot get through and they are not
14 allowed to have emergency voucher authorization
15 under those particular circumstances.

16 What this means is that the recipient
17 leaves that particular retail location without
18 food.

19 The complication that was mentioned
20 earlier by the gentleman from FMI, which makes this
21 even worse for the recipient, is the fact that
22 there are many times where to the retailer the
23 system appears to be going through an outage, when
24 in fact it isn't an outage at all. It's just the

1 system is reacting so extremely slow that the
2 process takes too long for the transaction to
3 occur.

4 What this means to the retailer and to the
5 recipient, is that once again their transaction has
6 not gone through, and they again leave that
7 particular building with no food.

8 The worse part of that particular scenario
9 is not only do they leave without food, but that
10 transaction then will later on process. And by
11 processing, it then debits that particular account
12 and leaves that particular customer without those
13 particular benefits.

14 The resolution that I listened to earlier
15 from the gentleman from FMI is in fact quite
16 accurate, that it can take 10 to 45 or more days to
17 resolve the fact that that transaction did go
18 through, even though the recipient received no
19 benefits and no food for that particular visit.

20 There are a few things that I believe we
21 need to do in order to rectify this moving
22 forward.

23 First of all, we need to make certain that
24 when there are system outages of this particular

1 nature, that the emergency voucher system be
2 immediately implemented and that we are able to
3 utilize that voucher system until such time the
4 system situation is rectified. And I believe that
5 we need to continue to do that until there is a
6 quantifiable time period which Citibank and EDS can
7 demonstrate that they do in fact have system
8 stability.

9 I also believe we need to have a USDA-
10 sponsored evaluation of the Citibank and EDS
11 processing systems, and we need to be able to
12 identify technical modifications that they may need
13 to make in order to help our program.

14 One of the things that was mentioned
15 earlier in earlier comments was relating to the
16 fact that the system utilizes the same system
17 utilized for other EFT-type transactions.

18 I can tell you that I represent several
19 hundred stores throughout the Midwest region, and
20 in all the time that I have been involved in the
21 last seven and a half years in this particular
22 project I have not seen the number of outages in
23 any of those other transactionary situations that I
24 have seen with the EDS company.

1 We have seen side-by-side retailers that
2 have different processing systems for their regular
3 credit transactions different from their EBT
4 transactions, and they have proceeded without any
5 difficulty.

6 I believe one of the major premises
7 relative to the food stamp program is in fact that
8 the customer, in the retailer's case or in our case
9 here the recipient, is treated with the same type
10 of respect and dignity that any other customer
11 would receive regardless of their payment type.

12 The embarrassment that a customer receives
13 when they go to the front end of a grocery store
14 and they go to check out and they find out that
15 they are in fact declined because of system reasons
16 are embarrassing not only to the recipient but for
17 the retailer.

18 Because of that, we are asking that some
19 steps be put in place to engaged in the retail
20 community to also sure that the EBT systems and the
21 retailer is not vulnerable to long errors and
22 operational and support issues as the government
23 vendors continue to change.

24 I believe that in some locations we have

1 embarrassing situations where television crews will
2 show up to our stores and will in fact point the
3 finger at the retailer for the issues that they are
4 having relative to the processing problems with the
5 EBT vendor. We want to make sure that it's very
6 clear that it's not in fact -- they are not in fact
7 at fault.

8 But even at that, retailers are going out
9 of their way to help those recipients to rectify
10 the problem immediately at the store and are given
11 up funds. Perhaps it's a taxi ride back home,
12 perhaps it's give away all the food the recipient
13 normally got to accommodate the client.

14 That is not our responsible to do.
15 However, we continue to support the food stamp
16 initiative in this particular endeavor.

17 I appreciate the time to speak today.
18 Thank you.

19 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

20 Gary Terpstra.

21 MR. TERPSTRA: I got nervous there for a
22 minute when you proposed bypassing number six.

23 Good afternoon, Under Secretary Watkins,
24 Deputy Under Secretary Paradis and Regional

1 Administrator Bell. Hi, Ted.

2 My name is Gary Terpstra. I represent the
3 Illinois Department of Human Services as the chief
4 of the Bureau of Foods Stamps, designated state
5 director of the food stamp program, also a board
6 member of the reconciliation.

7 I wanted to add my thanks, Under Secretary
8 Watkins, for the opportunity to come out and your
9 attempt to get an honest look at what is going on
10 with the food stamp program.

11 It should go without saying that the
12 Department of Human Services has a substantial
13 stake in a successful food stamp program. Just as
14 you said, we both recognize the value of the food
15 stamp to our customers, the low income citizens of
16 the State of Illinois to whom food stamps represent
17 an adequate diet. And we also, we recognize our
18 responsibility to provide good service by timely
19 and accurate issuance of benefits.

20 But today we believe the effectiveness of
21 the food stamp program is seriously hampered by its
22 failure to adjust to the needs of its clients and
23 the current demands on the state agency that must
24 operate and administer the program.

1 It continues to place excessive emphasis
2 on compliance with detail procedural requirements
3 for application. It continues to require an unduly
4 complex formula for determining eligibility and
5 amount of benefits. State's performance in
6 carrying out their responsibilities is evaluated by
7 just a single criterion. That is, of the benefit
8 dollars issued, how many were precisely the correct
9 amount.

10 Meanwhile, in Illinois and in other states
11 as well the role of human services has changed
12 dramatically over the past few years. The focus of
13 cash assistance for families has turned from
14 benefit entitlement to providing limited support
15 while parents direct their energies towards
16 becoming self-sufficient.

17 All the people of Illinois have benefited
18 from this transformation as more and more former
19 AFDC, now TANF recipients, are becoming and working
20 towards becoming productive citizens.

21 For our able-bodied caseload, the focus of
22 the food stamp program must likewise turn away from
23 preoccupation with precise month-by-month
24 methodology benefits and towards supporting work

1 and working people.

2 At the same time, the food stamp program
3 also serves a population for whom self-sufficiency
4 is not a realistic goal. I'm speaking of the
5 elderly and disabled part. The program is under
6 increasing criticism for placing too many hurdles
7 before this group of customers, giving them too
8 little benefits to the effect that many of them
9 just don't bother.

10 The program needs to remove barriers so
11 that elderly and disabled households have easier
12 access to the food assistance they need and can
13 maximize their independence and well-being.

14 For all of our clients, regardless of the
15 their situation, program rules must be simplified
16 so that barriers to participation are reduced and
17 requirements are made more understandable for both
18 staff and clients.

19 Finally, more balanced measures of state
20 performance must be found which don't focus on
21 benefit amounts alone. States will be willing to
22 accept additional scrutiny of their program
23 operation if the result is a balanced appraisal of
24 those outcomes for which states can and should be

1 held responsible; efficient program operation and
2 good customer service.

3 We believe that to accomplish these ends a
4 broad program overhaul is necessary. The best
5 opportunity for such redirection will be the
6 reauthorization for Federal fiscal year 2003. We
7 look forward to participating in the process which
8 we hope will culminate in a viable legislative
9 proposal for a refocused food stamp program. One
10 which continues to provides low income people with
11 access to an adequate diet, but which is better
12 suited to the contemporary human services
13 environment.

14 Thank you again for the opportunity to
15 speak.

16 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

17 There are plenty of seats down in front,
18 so as people come in feel free to ask them to come
19 down front. There are plenty of seats.

20 Erlinda Bingham.

21 MS. BINGHAY: Thank you so much. I'm here
22 today because I'm a public health nutritionist.
23 And I'm a strong believer it's not just giving food
24 that will give us an ultimate answer, but at least

1 the real education that goes with the food.

2 So my request would be if we could make

3 nutrition education a strong mandate in the food

4 stamps program. You probably will know how WIC has

5 been so successful in the last three decades in

6 trying to increase breast-feeding and in trying to

7 lower infant mortality rate because we

8 nutritionists have made a strong impact to make

9 that happen.

10 And we in Chicago has been very innovative

11 in trying to really improve our level of delivery

12 of nutritional education. So if you could take

13 this message with you in terms of our role as a

14 dietician and nutritionist, that we can do a lot

15 better in terms of improving the health of our

16 community.

17 Thank you.

18 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

19 Jon Janowski.

20 MR. JANOWSKI: That's a really good attempt.

21 Actually, my name is Jon Janowski. I'm

22 the director of advocacy at the Hunger Task Force

23 of Milwaukee, and I'm going to be speaking with

24 Sherrie Kay, the director. Joint testimony is

1 always the most effective we find.

2 I'm going to focus more on the policy end
3 of things. A lot of advocates from around the
4 country have made very specific proposals of how
5 the food stamp program can be simplified and
6 improved, and we would just like to reiterate our
7 support for some of those proposals that we
8 perceive as most important and necessary for
9 improving the lives of low income individuals and
10 families.

11 First of all, we support raising the
12 minimum benefit level from \$10, because so many of
13 the Wisconsin elderly, homebound, and disabled
14 population get only the minimum benefit.

15 As we heard from many of our food pantry
16 recipients, it's a lot easier to come to the food
17 pantry and get food than it is to apply for food
18 stamps. Especially when you wind up getting only
19 \$10 a month.

20 The elderly and homebound population,
21 because of their particular food and security needs
22 and issues, should receive at least a minimum
23 benefit amount of \$75 a month in benefits, and the
24 overall minimum benefit level should be no less

1 than \$25 a month.

2 Second, the food stamp program income
3 level does need to be raised to 185 percent of the
4 federal poverty line. As many advocates around the
5 country have already indicated, low income families
6 need to earn more just to compensate for high
7 shelter and food costs, particularly in urban areas
8 like Milwaukee.

9 We know that many of our food pantry
10 recipients pay as much as 50 percent of their
11 household income for shelter costs. With food
12 costs rising in the poorest parts of Milwaukee,
13 there is not a lot left over to keep a household in
14 that self-sufficient category that we are all
15 striving for.

16 The food stamp program needs to represent
17 the realistic situations of low income families.
18 Making families income eligible at 185 percent of
19 the federal poverty line is a step in that
20 direction.

21 Third, the Hunger Relief Act must be
22 passed. This legislation would restore food stamp
23 eligibility for legal immigrants, a population that
24 increasingly is turning to emergency food providers

1 like us in Milwaukee to compensate for food stamp
2 cuts.

3 The Hunger Relief Act also includes
4 important improvements relating to vehicle
5 ownership and the shelter cap. And, as the T Fact
6 administrator in Milwaukee County, we know
7 firsthand the importance of the federal commodities
8 program, and how increased demand for emergency
9 food has put us into the position that we may be
10 low on food as we enter the fall this year.

11 The Hunger Relief Act will bolster the
12 T-Fact program and assist us in at least meeting
13 the basic emergency food demands that are
14 continually increasing in Milwaukee County.

15 Fourth, the low income, jobless, childless
16 adults who lost access to the food stamp program in
17 1996 need to have their benefit eligibility
18 restored.

19 In Milwaukee, and I suspect in many areas
20 of the country, these individuals are the poorest
21 of the poor and have inundated emergency food
22 programs. This population lost access to a basic
23 safety net in Milwaukee a few years ago when
24 Milwaukee County disbanded it's general relief

1 program, and the food stamp cuts in the 1996
2 welfare law only exacerbated their already very
3 difficult situation.

4 This population, maybe more so than any
5 other that we deal with, needs to at least have
6 access to the food stamp program to even have a
7 chance at doing basic tasks that will allow them to
8 move forward to a self-sufficient life-style.

9 And finally, there needs to be some kind
10 of a transitional food stamp benefit for low income
11 families who are leaving cash assistance programs.
12 Many of these families are doing their best to move
13 into the world of mainstream employment, and all
14 they need is temporary assistance to help them
15 through this difficult transaction.

16 We would like to see families who are
17 leaving cash assistance be able to receive up to
18 six months of benefits with no income means test
19 and no recertification period. Simply providing
20 hard-working families with an opportunity to feed
21 themselves while they are making a very difficult
22 life-style transition is essential to their ability
23 to move toward self-sufficiency.

24 In summary, we look forward to working

1 with you, the State of Wisconsin, Milwaukee County,
2 the W2 agencies, and certainly other advocates in
3 making these proposals become a reality. Surely at
4 a time when billions or trillions of dollars of
5 federal budget surpluses are being touted, we could
6 find some money to pay for these proposals and help
7 those who would like to joint the rest of us in
8 enjoying the benefits of our prosperous economy.

9 Thank you.

10 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

11 Sherrie Kay.

12 MS. KAY: Hello. I'm back. My name is
13 Sherrie Kay. I'm the director of the Hunger Task
14 Force in Milwaukee.

15 Although most of you are familiar with the
16 Hunger Task Force, for the benefit of the rest the
17 people in the audience, our organization has a 26
18 year administration as a hunger relief organization
19 in Milwaukee. We act both as a food bank and as an
20 advocacy organization. Our mission states that we
21 exist to relieve hunger today and to combat future
22 hunger.

23 For the past four years our organization
24 has been keeping involved in the food stamp

1 campaign. We grew quietly from enforcement of the
2 standards, increased demand for food, through the
3 local charities that we assist. We help 110 local
4 food pantries through our programs and homeless
5 shelters by gathering and redistributing food.

6 Our food is distributed using an
7 established methodology related to need. For every
8 100 people assisted, 20 cases of food is given to
9 local programs. Although simple, this method has
10 been consistent and has allowed us to serve as a
11 witness to the number of increasing demands for
12 emergency food.

13 Over the past five years this demand has
14 rocketed up over seven to ten percent annually each
15 year over the prior year. Alarming us to the
16 extent that we can't believe that for the first
17 time ever we would be unable to meet the community
18 need for food.

19 Our food stamp campaign began rather
20 innocuously as an inquiry into the underlying
21 reasons for the increasing demand in the need of
22 emergency food.

23 We went out to our programs and
24 interviewed individuals and families in need of

1 emergency food. We found that they reported a loss
2 of foods stamps, either partial or total,
3 experienced in the wake of a conversion from AFDC
4 to pay for performance and W2.

5 We found that the families that were new
6 entrances into the workforce were less likely to be
7 secure in where their food was coming than they
8 once were and in comparison to their non-working
9 peers.

10 Because the food stamp program remained an
11 entitlement, we accompanied applicants and
12 primarily expedited cases. We witnesses
13 significant wait times, improper communication
14 regarding eligibility, and issues that would later
15 be determined violations of federal food stamp
16 regulations.

17 Our Congressman, Tom Barry (phonetic),
18 received our survey results and was disturbed to
19 the extent that he requested an inquiry into the
20 issues. Regional FMN staff visited, audited the
21 program and found that applicants' rights have been
22 violated, including their right to receive an
23 application, their right to a timely review, their
24 right to get information about their rights, and

1 their right to a fair hearing.

2 USDA directed the State of Wisconsin's
3 Department of Workforce Development to take
4 corrective action. Operations memos were issued to
5 the County and two agencies directing them to
6 effect change.

7 Six months passed by. In a return visit
8 by FMN staff found continuing violations of
9 recipient rights. The USDA directed the State of
10 Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development again
11 to invest resources into outreach and to take
12 additional corrective action, including directly
13 monitoring on a monthly basis the Wisconsin work
14 sites in Milwaukee County.

15 Later that month our organization received
16 the Pyramid of Excellence award in recognition of
17 our advocacy on behalf of households needing food
18 service.

19 About a year ago the General Accounting
20 Office issued a report on food stamp caseload
21 requirement. Wisconsin, which is known as the
22 international welfare reform leader, led the nation
23 in caseload requirements.

24 The GAO states under reason for the

1 decline, two reasons were cited. The first was an
2 improved economy, and the second was the very
3 possibly troubling idea that welfare reform had
4 influenced caseload requirements.

5 Earlier this month our state's legislative
6 audit review released its report and cited specific
7 reasons for Wisconsin's caseload decline. This
8 report was critical of welfare reform as a causal
9 factor, including Wisconsin's light touch
10 philosophy, in which people are only given what
11 they ask for and not what they need.

12 Further, the report offered insight into
13 the administrative problems related to the
14 fragmentation of our system created by
15 privatization of welfare. Work requirements for
16 able-bodied adults and increased frequency of
17 interviews also complicated the program to the
18 extent that potentially people would rather quit,
19 be confused by its demands to the extent that they
20 would fall away from it, or be fired from it.

21 Interestingly, the report never stated
22 that caseload decline had occurred because of
23 everyone that received food stamps was now better
24 off.

1 Our food stamp campaign in early June
2 gathered all the involved parties from Milwaukee in
3 a room and supported a dialog on food stamps rights
4 violations. We were all able to agree that
5 applicants have the right to receive a food stamp
6 application.

7 Although this may seem really obvious, at
8 the time it seemed like a huge victory because 42
9 percent of the time our staff visited site
10 application offices they were unable to obtain
11 one.

12 Since the beginning of this year we've
13 worked in cooperation with our Department of
14 Welfare Reform Agency in Milwaukee to help make
15 improvements to a single region within Milwaukee.
16 United Migrant Opportunity Service has provided
17 significant funding for a door-to-door campaign
18 aimed at assisting potentially eligible people to
19 gain information about the food stamp program and
20 rights and the application procedure.

21 Unfortunately, new applicants experienced
22 the same barriers they had previously, with one
23 order reporting that their experience was either
24 confusing, rude, discouraging or slow.

1 Although 80 percent received food stamps
2 when they first applied, 44 percent were no longer
3 receiving continuing benefits, half because their
4 income was too high, the other half because they
5 were unable to complete the new process.

6 The strong emphasis on reducing errors in
7 their community has caused entitlement workers to
8 place undue verification efforts upon applicants.

9 USDA staff have been unable to schedule to
10 make necessary amendments and this project will
11 likely terminate at summer's end because local folk
12 cannot effect change in the absence of help through
13 local, state and federal government, who remain
14 absent and silent on the issues.

15 Overall, I'd say that our food stamp
16 campaign has been extremely unsuccessful. Although
17 we garnered significant recognition for our
18 advocacy and we learned a great deal about both
19 government and community areas, we have won no
20 successes for needy people as a class.

21 I was unsure if coming today even made any
22 sense. This conversation that we are supposed to
23 have is one that I feel like we've had before.
24 Most of my comments have been heard already.

1 From my perspective this process is
2 repetitive, frustrating and nonsensical. We, the
3 advocates and the needy people that we brought with
4 us today that are in need of emergency help, are
5 outside of what seems like a very large and closed
6 door. We are knocking on the door and we're asking
7 to be let in. We are hopeful that you will do
8 something.

9 Still, the few times the door has opened
10 and something has either fallen out of it or leaped
11 out of it, it is old news or the same message: A
12 lawyer, or a bureaucrat is reviewing some
13 compelling evidence, and some day somebody might do
14 something to start insuring that something gets
15 done.

16 I know that today is supposed to be a
17 conversation about the future and about
18 reauthorization of the food stamp program
19 specifically. You have been to a number of cities,
20 you have heard from far brighter people than myself
21 about uncomplicating the program and making it more
22 accessible and easing the burden for application on
23 recipients.

24 Insofar as the food stamp authorization

1 goes, I'm sure that you guys already know what to
2 do. The challenge really will be doing it.

3 I'm personally unclear if the political
4 will exists, or perhaps more importantly if it will
5 ever get to reauthorization.

6 You see, there are people more interested
7 in privatizing the food stamp program than
8 modifying it in some way. These people will tell
9 you that they know how to make it better and that
10 they will save you a lot of money doing it. The
11 people from Wisconsin will even describe their
12 already significant experience privatizing child
13 protective services, AFDC, general relief and
14 health care programs. They will tell you how they
15 reduced caseloads and made families more
16 self-sufficient and how everyone is better off
17 without any help from the government.

18 If they are really honest, they will also
19 tell that you they have taken significant steps to
20 privatize the food stamp program in Milwaukee. For
21 example, in Milwaukee able-bodied adults have to
22 work for their entitlement to food stamps. Maybe
23 more important, Milwaukee has already been
24 subordinated to the private welfare agencies for

1 its employee work rules and for its operating
2 policies and procedures, including food stamp and
3 medical assistance revenue. But I think you guys
4 already know that.

5 Maybe by the time the food stamp program
6 gets reauthorized it will be something totally
7 different, something private that entitles worthy
8 and working people to get food. The unworthy, the
9 sick, the disabled, the old and the very young,
10 they will be able to make due with support from the
11 charities.

12 Forgive me for what has been typified in
13 the past as a hardened attitude, but it's difficult
14 to add clarity to a very murky pool. If we could
15 truly have a conversation about food stamps, I
16 would ask when is the federal government going to
17 intervene on behalf of people in need to make sure
18 that the food stamp program, as enacted by
19 Congress, is accessible to the people who need it.

20 We know you guys are a partner of the
21 state, administrative program. But when your
22 partner doesn't act as your partner and when it's
23 clear and convincing in terms of the evidence that
24 people are going without food, what event will it

1 take to gain your involvement?

2 That's the conversation that we want to
3 have in Milwaukee. And until we get the
4 conversation, I guess Hunger Task Force will stay
5 in its effective place, feeding the poor,
6 advocating the change, and hoping that one day the
7 USDA will make the decision to get involved, stay
8 involved until all the people who need the help get
9 it.

10 Thank you.

11 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

12 Dorothy Rand.

13 MS. RAND: Good afternoon. I'm Dorothy
14 Rand. I'm the staff attorney with the National
15 Center on Poverty Law.

16 That is a tough act to follow, Sherrie.

17 Unfortunately, I'm going to have to recite
18 a couple of the same problems here in Illinois.
19 The National Center on Poverty Law represents low
20 income people in the areas of welfare, housing,
21 community reinvestment and financial education. We
22 have contacts throughout the state. We are a
23 member of the Work, Welfare and Family Coalition,
24 the statewide Public Benefits Task Force, and we

1 receive reports about welfare and food stamp
2 program issues from people around the state.

3 As you know, the Illinois House Human
4 Services Committee recently held a hearing on July
5 11 in Chicago about food stamp issues. My
6 colleague, Audrey Wilson, testified there. And my
7 written comments cover a lot of the detailed
8 descriptions of the local office problems we are
9 hearing about. They are not isolated incidents of
10 one office here or there or a Chicago issue or a
11 downstate issue. It's from around the state.

12 The five most significant local office
13 issues that we have been seeing include:

14 TANF related cutoffs and diversions that
15 result in food stamp cutoffs, even though the
16 people remain eligible for food stamps.

17 The failure to timely process applications
18 for recertification.

19 Failure to provide expedited food stamps
20 to eligible individuals. I can't tell you how many
21 times we have had case workers say there is no such
22 thing as expedited food stamps.

23 The failure to provide exemptions
24 regarding vehicles. I know the rules are very

1 complicated. Aspects of the Hunger Relieve Act
2 help solve that problem. But in the meantime the
3 rules aren't being followed, and as a result people
4 who are eligible are not getting food stamp
5 benefits.

6 Finally, the failure to properly apply
7 income accounting rules and to take into account
8 things like medical expenses and child care
9 expenses.

10 I'm not going to go into all the details
11 about the examples that we've received from around
12 the state, but I'd like to focus on our
13 recommendations and a couple of other issues.

14 One issue that came up recently as a
15 result of a group meeting to discuss older adults
16 in the TANF program is that of older adults caring
17 for children in the TANF program.

18 In the TANF program, as I'm sure you know,
19 these caretaker relatives have the opportunity to
20 opt out of the TANF grant and get a child only
21 grant and not have their resources counted towards
22 that. But we don't have that same opportunity in
23 the food stamp program.

24 I think it's something that you should

1 consider with reauthorization, the possibility of a
2 child only food stamp grant so that these elderly
3 caretaker relatives can get food stamps at least
4 for those children. Because often when their
5 meager resources are included with the children
6 that they are caring for in the TANF program, then
7 the whole unit becomes ineligible. Then the
8 children can't get food stamps either.

9 Some other recommendations. Some are
10 addressed to the problems here at the state level
11 in Illinois and some are federal recommendations.

12 I want to emphasize regarding the state
13 issues that our gripes are not with the policy
14 people, they are -- Terpstra and other people at
15 IDHS have done an excellent job of trying to
16 provide access and push the envelope on the food
17 stamp issues and the waivers that are available and
18 encouraging USDA to approve some of the waivers
19 that they have requested that have been denied.

20 But our focus is on local office issues
21 and the systems problems.

22 The computers are very outdated. They
23 don't have enough information for the case workers
24 to do an adequate analysis of people's eligibility

1 for benefits, and as a result a lot of mistakes are
2 made. And then that compounds the whole problem by
3 having quality control issues. And if the state
4 just had a better computer system, the case workers
5 could do a better job, the clients will get better
6 benefits, the state and USDA would have fewer
7 quality control problems, and we'd all be happier.

8 Another issue at the local office level is
9 the fact that case workers often don't have access
10 to their own policy rules and the worker action
11 guide. It may be on the computer, but if they are
12 on the screen doing an application, they would have
13 to leave the screen and then get back into the
14 computer to see the policy manual. And they don't
15 have the hard copies there to work with, and so
16 oftentimes they just sort of guess as to what the
17 policy is instead of looking it up, and again
18 mistakes are made.

19 Obviously better training and supervision
20 of case workers would improve some of this, but I
21 don't want to dump on the case workers. A lot of
22 this, the mistakes, are due to the fact that it is
23 a very complicated system and needs to be
24 simplified.

1 And you heard at the July 11 hearing with
2 the Illinois House and Human Services Committee how
3 really deplorable many of the local office
4 situations are for the workers through a lack of
5 machines and lack of ability to do their jobs in a
6 professional manner, and that certainly needs to be
7 addressed.

8 Also, case worker caseloads must come
9 down. The average here is just outrageous. I
10 think it was 400 cases per case worker, and we
11 heard testimony that some had triple caseloads to
12 cover for people who weren't there.

13 We'd like to see the Illinois Department
14 of Human Services and USDA send a very clear
15 message about the importance of nutrition
16 assistance and in an effort to insure that as many
17 eligible people as possible get benefits and are
18 not discouraged from applying for benefits.

19 We'd like to see Illinois commit some
20 state funds for an outreach which could be matched
21 by federal funds. So far Illinois has not opted to
22 do that.

23 We'd also like to suggest that the
24 department implement a sort of receipt and tickler

1 system. A lot of times clients say that they've
2 gone to a local office, they have submitted their
3 required verification and proof of earnings and so
4 on, only to have the case worker call back later
5 and say we don't have your whatever it is. And if
6 there were some system where they could just get a
7 receipt that showed that they and the thing that
8 they brought to the office, we wouldn't have to go
9 around in circles on this.

10 Similarly, if there was some kind of a
11 tickler system for the case workers to remind them
12 of their deadlines, and this applies not just to
13 application but to recertifications and to appeals,
14 to make sure that there is some reminder, some
15 signal so that things get done on time and they
16 don't get lost in the system.

17 I know from practicing law in a law firm
18 there are tickler systems and there is software out
19 there that could be implemented to have these kind
20 of reminders, and it's just a matter of getting the
21 technology and doing it.

22 I agree with the other recommendations as
23 far as passing the Hunger Relief Act and the Fork
24 Act to expand access and outreach regarding the

1 food stamp program.

2 And I'd also like to see USDA use more
3 testers as the auditors did in Wisconsin. I'd like
4 to see testers used here in Illinois to help us
5 document these problems at the local office level,
6 or if they don't have the resources to do their own
7 testing, to authorize other groups that have
8 testers available to do the testing and help
9 document these problems and help solve them.

10 Many of the problems that I mentioned in
11 the local offices, as you know, are violations of
12 federal food stamp law and regulations. As
13 attorneys we have the ability to sue people about
14 these problems. It's not our preferred method of
15 resolving these issues.

16 And as you know, we contacted USDA and the
17 Illinois Department of Human Services over a year
18 ago to discuss many of these same issues and try to
19 work on these issues in a cooperative manner.
20 We're still willing to work with you and with the
21 department in a cooperative manner to resolve these
22 issues, and I think that we should set up some
23 meetings in the very near future.

24 Thank you very much.

1 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

2 Anne Irving.

3 MS. IRVING: My name is Anne Irving and I'm
4 the director of public policy with the American
5 Federation of State, County, and Municipal
6 Employees, Council 31. Our union represents the
7 Illinois Department of Human Services case workers
8 who handle food stamp cases.

9 And we'd like to do sort of a little bit
10 of what Dorothy did, which is take this opportunity
11 to talk a little bit about improvements in the
12 Illinois program that our members have advocated
13 for and then talk a little bit about how USDA plays
14 a role in that.

15 I would actually like to start out by
16 saying how much we appreciated the comments made by
17 Alice Holden at the hearing Dorothy referenced that
18 was recently held by the Illinois House of
19 Representative's Human Services Committee.

20 Director Holden laid out several suggested
21 improvements, actually suggestions the USDA has
22 made to Illinois for having to improve our states'
23 very, very horrible food stamp error rate. And in
24 fact, many of the suggestions that he raised were

1 raised by our case workers. It was interesting to
2 see the similarities in concerns and solutions.

3 Just to run through those, first of all as
4 I mentioned, worker caseloads for food stamps in
5 Illinois is extremely high. It's actually an
6 average of 450 cases per worker. And keep in mind
7 that these workers generally don't specialize.
8 Some offices do, but most offices are handling a
9 mix of cases.

10 Clearly this contributes to Illinois
11 problems in terms of delivering adequate services
12 to clients. Unfortunately, while our union has
13 advocated and certainly many advocates have
14 advocated for improving these caseloads by hiring
15 more workers, the Department seems to be going in
16 the opposite direction. At least their budget is.

17 In fact, this year a budget was approved
18 that effectively cut 200 case workers out of the
19 system. So we are going in the wrong direction
20 instead of in the right direction.

21 And while Illinois has apparently made a
22 commitment to improve its food stamp error rate,
23 it's very hard to understand how we are going to do
24 that unless we improve the situation with

1 caseloads.

2 Secondly, as again Dorothy referred, there
3 is a problem in terms of office equipment and also
4 in terms of clerical support that makes the job of
5 the case worker much more difficult.

6 Dorothy talked about the problems in terms
7 of the computer system. There has also been a
8 problem in that the number of clerical workers have
9 been cut in the offices over the past several
10 years, which means that there are no file clerks
11 available to help with filing. And in fact, a lot
12 of that work is being done in some offices by
13 clients who are fulfilling their work requirements,
14 and this is simply not working out. It's led to a
15 lot of lost and missing information that could be
16 jeopardizing client benefits, makes it difficult
17 for the client, and also again increases our error
18 rate in Illinois.

19 Third, we really need a continuous
20 improvement in training. Some changes have been
21 made as a result of the advocacy that we have
22 done. However, case workers are still talking
23 about people being handed caseloads without
24 adequate training and without support from

1 supervisors, and as Dorothy mentioned, without even
2 adequate ability to reference the department
3 manuals.

4 And furthermore, there continues to be
5 frequent changes in policies and procedure, whether
6 formal or informal, and clearly when changes are
7 made it needs to be follow-up with additional
8 training.

9 And finally, management really needs to
10 make a commitment to making changes in the program
11 without drawing resources away from other important
12 programs that the Illinois Department of Human
13 Services administers.

14 Our case workers actually believe, and to
15 some degrees I believe the secretary Backer of the
16 Illinois Department of Human Services admitted,
17 that the food stamp error rate increased so sharply
18 between 1994 and 1999 in Illinois because we were
19 so focus on moving clients from welfare to work.

20 And if now there is going to be a
21 commitment to fixing the food stamp program, again
22 without the addition of new resources into the
23 equation, it's going to impact other programs. And
24 that is a real problem.

1 So again, in terms of what the solution
2 is, we feel more staff with continued efforts to
3 improve training and equipment and clarify policies
4 will bring around a permanent reduction in our food
5 stamp error rate and clearly will improve the
6 services to clients.

7 Now, we looked to USDA to encourage the
8 state and in some ways to force the state to make
9 the changes.

10 And it actually relates to a comment that
11 Mr. Holden made with regard to accountability. He
12 talked about the need to improve accountability in
13 terms of office management and case workers. And
14 we feel there is a need to improve accountability
15 and to hold the state accountable to the federal
16 government for the way these services are being
17 delivered.

18 A concern that is raised here, and this is
19 very much from the union perspective at this point,
20 and that has to do with frustration developing
21 around how this program is being administered. And
22 oftentimes that frustration is turning on case
23 workers, either in a very personal way or sort of
24 as a group.

1 And our concern is that as this -- if this
2 program does not improve, that there will be calls
3 for a quick fix. And one of the quick fixes we
4 have seen in human service over the past several
5 years is calls to privatize these services.

6 And, you know, this has been on a
7 for-profit basis and this has been done on a
8 not-for-profit basis. And there is this idea that
9 somehow the magical solution is to hand it over to
10 private industry and that will take care of all the
11 problems.

12 Our solution is that if you want
13 accountability, privatization is not the way to
14 go. And we've heard some excellent examples of
15 that from Wisconsin. It's been our theory that not
16 only does privatization not automatically mean
17 improvement, but frequently it means more
18 problems.

19 So in terms of again what USDA can do
20 here, we would encourage that as we moved towards
21 reauthorization that there be a discussion about
22 and a commitment to preserving the food stamp
23 program as a place where -- as a program that is a
24 core function and as a place where families and

1 individuals can depend upon receiving sustenance.
2 That it should not become a playground for private
3 industry to test out new programs and new solutions
4 that in fact make it worse. And where we lose the
5 kind of accountability that we feel we need when
6 state government is in charge.

7 Thank you.

8 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

9 Sue Hall.

10 MS. HALL: Good afternoon. Good afternoon,
11 Under Secretary Watkins, Ms. Paradis, Mr. Bell.
12 I'm Susan Hall, food stamp program manager of the
13 Michigan Family Independent Agency, and also
14 president of the American Association of Food Stamp
15 Directors.

16 I want to thank you for the opportunity to
17 share some thoughts about the food stamp program,
18 and I personally have a deep interest in the
19 program. I've been with the program for over 20
20 years in one capacity or another at the state
21 level.

22 The food stamp program is an important
23 component of the safety net for low income
24 households. Recently we have all become concerned

1 that the program has fallen out of step with the
2 current national and state priorities of supporting
3 the movement of families and individuals towards
4 independent. Studies have shown eligible people
5 are not using the program to help support their
6 families.

7 When the program was faced with access
8 problems in 1970s -- that tells you how far back I
9 go -- Congress took the bold step of eliminating
10 the purchase requirement. It's again time to take
11 bold steps to increase access and appropriate
12 support for families striving to obtain
13 independence and seniors who seek to remain in
14 their own home. It's time to invest in the program
15 to achieve these outcomes.

16 Before we talk about the changes needed in
17 the program though, it's important that we decide
18 what the program is designed to achieve. Then we
19 need to determine the appropriate measures of
20 program performance.

21 If we look at what is measured today, you
22 would come to the conclusion that the goal of the
23 program is to issue benefits in rigid compliance
24 with detailed budgeting rules. Nothing else is

1 important.

2 Many of the program requirements

3 constitute barriers to access. I think we have

4 been hearing that.

5 The quality control method of evaluation

6 must be replaced by reasonable outcome measures

7 related to program goals.

8 The program needs major simplification.

9 Currently, low income households applying for food

10 stamps face something akin to completing the long

11 1040 tax form, plus attachments, plus

12 verifications. If they're households with

13 earnings, they face not just one per year, but up

14 to four times per year.

15 We have to fundamentally change the way we

16 determine food stamp benefits so that the

17 application is like the 1040EZ. The Medicaid

18 programs made great strides in this area by

19 creating short application forms, minimizing

20 verification, and simplifying the entire

21 application and benefit approval process. The Food

22 Stamp Program needs to apply these lessons.

23 The program must approach benefits

24 determination in a new way. We must explore an

1 approach that uses both income and household size
2 as factors in computing deductions. Under this
3 type of calculation, the benefit reduction rate of
4 30 percent would have to be drastically reduced to
5 more nearly reflect the amount of income it's
6 reasonable for a low income household to be
7 expected to spend on its food.

8 Another part of benefit determination
9 involves changes households are required to
10 report. The program must move to reasonable
11 reporting requirements that relate to major changes
12 in household circumstances.

13 We must decide if it's more important to
14 provide access to food for low income households or
15 worry that a household's fluctuating income means
16 that it might get a few more dollars than it
17 deserves, that a really down-to-the-penny budget
18 would give them.

19 Is there great harm to the fabric of
20 American society if a household below the poverty
21 level gets a few more dollars for food in a given
22 month than a quality control determination would
23 have given it? Is it so important that we recover
24 these benefits from these families living at or

1 below the poverty level, or can we design a program
2 that recognizes that fluctuations occur and we
3 accept it because we have a bigger goal in mind?

4 Along with simplifying the budgeting
5 process and reporting, the program needs major
6 improvements in its policy regarding resources to
7 promote better access, especially for working
8 families. The rules are archaic and
9 counterproductive to all households who need to
10 work, to seek food, to attend to their health and
11 the well-being of their families and themselves.

12 The resource limit itself has not been
13 raised in two decades. It should be raised and
14 made the same for all households. Households with
15 people 60 years and older and households without
16 people 60 years old.

17 All households need a cushion. They need
18 this to move forward. All families need to keep
19 cars running, make home repairs. Many need savings
20 to take advantage of educational opportunities so
21 they can move up the economic ladder. The program
22 should be structured to allow for these needs.

23 The program needs to do more to promote
24 automatic access for SSI recipients and persons

1 living on cash assistance. We can again look to
2 our Medicaid partners for ideas. In many states
3 SSI recipients are automatic given payment without
4 a separate determination.

5 Consumers do this. One agency passes
6 information to another. Medicaid also provides a
7 transitional benefit to persons living on cash
8 assistance. Food stamps needs to explore this idea
9 and adopt it.

10 I have lots more ideas of program
11 improvements, but I'm not going to take up your
12 time now. I'm sure there is going to be lots of
13 opportunity as we approach reauthorization.

14 I just hope that as we move toward
15 modernizing the Food Stamp Program that we seek to
16 create a program that emphasizes supporting working
17 families and vulnerable adults, that provides them
18 access to food, and that we back up that intention
19 with an investment that such an important goal
20 deserves.

21 Thank you very much.

22 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

23 Jane Ahlstrom.

24 MS. AHLSTROM: Good afternoon. My name is

1 Jane Ahlstrom, and I'm speaking on behalf of the
2 Council 11, the American Federation of State,
3 County, and Municipal Employees in Madison,
4 Wisconsin. I'm very pleased to have the
5 opportunity to be here.

6 Our members work throughout Wisconsin to
7 insure that families and individuals who are
8 eligible for food stamps get the benefits to which
9 they are entitled. Ever since the end of AFDC we
10 have been concerned about how our
11 citizens -- about our citizen's accessibility to
12 safety net services such as food stamps,
13 particularly in Milwaukee County where five private
14 agencies are running our W2 program.

15 During the first two years of this
16 program, the agencies were able to amass millions
17 of dollars in profits, since their lower cost meant
18 greater profits. And they were able to do this by
19 cutting their spending on client services. They
20 were able to do this also by diverting clients away
21 from the program altogether.

22 Many of those diverted from W2 were also
23 eligible for and were diverted from food stamps and
24 Medicaid, even though they were also eligible for

1 those services. And only recently have we begun to
2 see the numbers of food stamp recipients in our
3 state increase again.

4 We're also disappointed that you didn't
5 agree. The partner work force development
6 continuously advocates the light touch policy,
7 which serves that if they don't ask, don't tell
8 kind of policy. It hindered the staff in many of
9 the agencies from informing clients about the
10 availability of services such as food stamps, and
11 recently came under fire in an audit conducted by
12 the state audit bureau for causing confusion for
13 case workers who believe they weren't supposed to
14 routinely offer food stamps and other services.

15 We believe this policy has jeopardized
16 families by making food and nutrition more
17 difficult to obtain and is in fact contradictory to
18 many of the outreach efforts that are currently
19 underway both in food stamps and in Medicaid.

20 We believe that a key to strengthening the
21 integrity of the Food Stamp Program is maintaining
22 it as a publicly administered program. And we,
23 too, are concerned about privatization of many of
24 these services.

1 We are very concerned about the way in
2 which DWD has recently forced Milwaukee County to
3 subcontract with a private agency there to
4 determine clients' eligibility for food stamps and
5 other services.

6 We believe this places the county in a
7 subservient role to the private agency, and is
8 de facto privatization of the program without the
9 benefit of the approval of the USDA.

10 Although your Department does not approve
11 the pending privatization waiver and allows the
12 state to go ahead, we fear this contract
13 arrangement will accomplish that by giving the
14 private agencies the authorization to control the
15 program's operation through participation in hiring
16 county staff and overruling county operating
17 procedures.

18 As we see it, the subcontracts skirt
19 around many of the merit-based protections that a
20 publicly run program offers. This is particularly
21 worrisome to us given how the agency in the past
22 has diverted clients away from services.

23 We'd also like to recognize the work of
24 the Hunger Task Force and other advocacy groups in

1 Milwaukee which have been instrumental in bringing
2 eligible families back to the program through their
3 intensive outreach and by helping clients advocate
4 and navigate the barriers that are brought about by
5 the privatization of W2. We applaud them and
6 support them in their efforts.

7 And thank you for the opportunity to speak
8 with you today.

9 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

10 Lisa Hamler-Podowski.

11 MS. HAMLER-PODOWLSKI: Good afternoon. I'd
12 like to thank you, Under Secretary Watkins, Deputy
13 Under Secretary Paradis, and Regional Administrator
14 Ted Bell. Before I get started, I'd like to say a
15 special thank you to Julie for attending a
16 conference that we held in Ohio.

17 I guess first I should introduce myself.
18 My name is Lisa Hamler-Podowski. I'm the director
19 of the Ohio Food Policy and Quality Action Center,
20 and also serve as the deputy relations liaison, the
21 Ohio Association of Second Harvest Food Banks,
22 representing some 2700 emergency food providers in
23 the State of Ohio.

24 Deputy Under Secretary Paradis came to a

1 statewide conference that we held in early April
2 and convened a pre-listening session with advocates
3 in emergency food providers on the Food Stamp
4 Program. The summary of those are reported in my
5 packet of information on my testimony.

6 Also, I would like to recognize Regional
7 Administrator Ted Bell for his commitment to come
8 to Ohio in December and see firsthand what was
9 happening way the emergency food providers and low
10 income individuals that we serve.

11 I am deeply concerned that we may have
12 gone too far in the name of welfare reform. In
13 Ohio we have seen some 600,000 people leave the
14 food stamp rolls. Where have they gone? They have
15 flooded emergency food providers across our state.
16 Last year our 2700 member agencies fed over 3.3
17 million Ohioans.

18 The fastest growing segment of the
19 population that we now serve are many people who
20 played by the rules and have left public
21 assistance, but yet they do not earn sufficient
22 wages in order to make their basic necessities and
23 be able to purchase food for their families.

24 These families we are finding still remain

1 categorically eligible for the Food Stamp Program,
2 but yet are bypassing the program. One, out of
3 embarrassment; out of the hassle factor; and out of
4 hard decisions that they can not take a day off of
5 their minimum wage jobs every three months, and in
6 some cases not one day but two days off, in order
7 to be recertified for the Food Stamp Program.

8 On June 1 and 2, Congressman Tony Hall
9 conducted his third regional fact-finding hunger
10 tour in Ohio. During that hunger tour we met the
11 faces of hidden hunger in the State of Ohio. Each
12 had a story to tell about how they had had either
13 poor experiences or were unable to access the Food
14 Stamp Program or other publicly-funded benefits in
15 the state.

16 I'd like to talk about two individuals
17 that we met. Darryl and Martha Wagner are two
18 ordinary people who find themselves requiring
19 assistance from a local food pantry in Logan,
20 Ohio. Darryl, who has just turned 70 and receives
21 about \$1,000 each month in retirement, which is
22 high for this region of Appalasia. They spend
23 about \$900 each month on rent, utilities, a car
24 payment. And as Darryl said, the bills just keep

1 piling up every day.

2 Martha has cancer and has lost her parents
3 and all of her brothers to the same disease. She
4 has had eight surgeries in the past ten years and
5 currently sees four doctors.

6 In order to get her medical -- to get her
7 to her medical appointments, Darryl and Martha must
8 drive 80 miles round trip. Even with Medicaid,
9 their gas and \$10 copays, these things add up
10 quickly.

11 So they had to swallow their pride and
12 they applied for food stamps. After filling out an
13 application that asks 700 questions, Darryl and
14 Martha were congratulated on being entitled to \$10
15 a month in benefits.

16 When an outreach worker spoke with Darryl
17 and Martha, neither of them had eaten in three
18 days. There was not a single box or a can of food
19 in their cupboards. After months of trying to
20 stretch everything that they had, Martha had
21 watered down a can of tomato soup to make it last
22 two weeks. They once had chicken noodle soup with
23 no chicken, just noodles that had been made from
24 eggs and flour.

1 Martha would lie to her husband and tell
2 him that she wasn't hungry so that he would have
3 food to eat. We never asked for help, she said,
4 until the doctor gave her two days to live. Why,
5 because she was not eating. She was dying from
6 malnutrition.

7 The food pantry has helped them. They get
8 bags of groceries, and for now she say we don't
9 have to add water to everything because now we can
10 eat again.

11 Darryl and Martha are the generation that
12 built this country. I know too many Darryl and
13 Marthas in the state of Ohio, who, too, are
14 suffering with low benefit levels and the stigma
15 and the hassle factor, for benefits that are far
16 too low.

17 I provided to you today a list of 30
18 recommendations.

19 It is amazing to me as I've sat here this
20 afternoon that it's very difficult to determine who
21 the state administrators are and who the advocates
22 are, because most of the recommendations are the
23 same. It's exciting and it tells me one thing, by
24 working together we may be able to achieve some of

1 these great gains.

2 To end, I'd like to speak just briefly
3 about a few of the recommendations that we feel
4 most strongly about that will significantly expand
5 and enhance the Food Stamp Program to help low
6 income families be able to provide for their
7 families.

8 One, we must raise the income level for
9 families at 185 percent.

10 We must implement a six month transitional
11 food stamp benefit for families who are leaving
12 cash assistance, meaning eliminating the means test
13 and recertification requirements.

14 We must fund initiatives which expand and
15 simplify a one-stop-shop application processing for
16 food stamps and other benefits, providing
17 incentives to the state and local governments to
18 maximize food stamp use for people on SSI,
19 Medicaid, CHIP, children's nutrition programs, the
20 earned income tax credit, Section Eight, public
21 housing, Head Start, child care, and, yes, the
22 Workforce Investment Act and other state funded
23 programs to enter programs such as Ohio's
24 Prevention, Retention and Contingency program.

1 We must move to increase the minimum
2 benefit allocation to \$75 a month. I strongly
3 encourage the administration to establish an annual
4 recertification period for seniors and permit them
5 to recertify by telephone or mail, eliminating the
6 face-to-face requirements.

7 Increase the resource levels to \$7500 for
8 all families, or tier resource levels based on
9 household size.

10 Exclude retirement benefits, retirement
11 accounts as food stamp resources.

12 In addition, we must look at providing
13 alternative and expanded access. One, and probably
14 most important, is that we must move to out-station
15 eligibility workers at community based
16 organizations such as foods pantries, soup
17 kitchens, food banks, and community based centers.
18 We need to insure that people can access food
19 stamps where they live and where they work.

20 We must reform the food stamp quality
21 control error system. We must develop incentives
22 for states to increase food stamp participation by
23 factoring in to quality control reviews and error
24 rates targeted participation rates and outreach.

1 We must develop quality control procedures
2 that encourage states to serve eligible households
3 and individuals instead of rewarding states which
4 discourage or deny participation.

5 We must track failures to provide
6 continued food stamp eligibility when public
7 assistance cases are closed due to time limits or
8 terminated due to sanctions.

9 We must require states to restore benefits
10 to households that were improperly terminated from
11 the Food Stamp Program retroactively to 1996.

12 We must move to simplify the food stamp
13 application recertification procedure by
14 establishing a federal six month recertification
15 period for households with earned income. We must
16 simplify regulations that allow less paperwork and
17 create a federal standardized application of two
18 pages or less.

19 I thank you for your time and I know that
20 you are busy people. But I also believe that we
21 have one chance to achieve a thorough and
22 systematic overhaul of the Food Stamp Program or it
23 may be lost for all future generations.

24 Thank you.

1 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

2 Diane Stokes.

3 MS. STOKES: Good afternoon. My name is Diane

4 Stokes. I'm vice-president of Local 2858. We

5 represent workers that work in welfare offices in

6 Cook County.

7 Our main concern is the large amount of

8 work that we are expected to do and the exact

9 manner and how. I'd like to go through some of the

10 details about this involving some of the

11 frustrations that the workers feel in not

12 physically being able to provide the clients with

13 what they need to get their benefits.

14 This in our opinion is the result of being

15 in the cross fire of welfare reform where the

16 entitlement programs have been, we think, neglected

17 in order for the managers in the various local

18 offices to maintain their stats on their TANF

19 caseloads.

20 There is an enormous amount of pressures

21 in the agency for management to reduce those

22 caseloads sizes. And from the union's perspective

23 we think that it impairs the ability of workers to

24 deliver those programs to the clients.

1 I have handled caseloads of about a
2 thousand or more clients, and I've handled that,
3 about I want to say, as soon as I stepped through
4 the door.

5 Most main workers or workers that do what
6 is called intake caseloads, we have almost every
7 type of caseloads there is. I mean, every type of
8 case there is, all the way from ABD with cash or
9 without cash. Main, which is medical benefits. We
10 have food stamp only cases, we have all these cases
11 with food stamps or without.

12 The only thing we don't do is cash.
13 That's mainly done by the TANF workers who are a
14 separate group and fairly much given priority in
15 terms of their caseloads.

16 What has happened physically in the
17 offices over the last couple of years is there has
18 been a large number of people that have retired,
19 and those people were mainly focusing on one area
20 of work, like ABD or transitional programs, and
21 over the number of years and even decades they
22 built up a great amount of experience in their
23 particular areas. So that's one problem with
24 delivering the services is that type of work that

1 we are doing, because the agency moved to integrate
2 basically the Illinois workforce. That there is a
3 gap in the experience of a lot of newer workers
4 that are coming in because it takes a great deal of
5 time and attention and education to get to the
6 point where you're able to handle that size of a
7 caseload and do that many cases without errors, and
8 still have time to work with your clients.

9 Another problem is that the -- well, the
10 union has basically in the last year come to some
11 agreement with the agency to provide more
12 training. And a couple years ago when I began my
13 training, I had basically a couple weeks and not
14 too much else. That was when I was working with a
15 lead worker who was more experienced worker who was
16 getting ready to retire. She had no computer
17 experience and was teaching me how to do everything
18 by hand. And then the agency was critical that I
19 was slow and I asked for computer training and I
20 really didn't get it until I was there nine
21 months.

22 That was basically an agreement between
23 the union and management, so there was more. There
24 has been more training in place in the last year.

1 Well, what the new people that have been
2 hired are saying is that this training is basically
3 done down at the office downtown, and then there is
4 a lag between the hands-on experience in the office
5 that is directly on the computer with, you know,
6 individuals, our small group training and in new
7 offices.

8 The agency is moving away from what is
9 called a lead worker, that's somebody who is more
10 experienced who does this day in, day out, hands-on
11 training.

12 So in our opinion you can't have it both
13 ways. You cannot remove that office training and
14 just have one trainer in the office for all the
15 people in an office. Which in our case would be
16 about 70 to 80 employees. You know, you just
17 cannot possibly do that and train the new
18 personnel.

19 So that is one thing we recommend is the
20 keeping in place the lead workers and having that
21 system examined. You know, what is the training
22 system in place, how does it work, who is
23 responsible for the day in, day out training and
24 what kind of overall program is there for

1 training. What is the relation between the formal
2 training downtown and what happens afterward in the
3 office.

4 Another problem of course is simplifying
5 communications and applications. The food stamp
6 application now in Illinois is six and a half pages
7 long, very fine print. I have a number of clients
8 who can't read it physically because it's simply
9 the print is too small, it's too long, it's some
10 clients with communication skills in terms of
11 thinking about how to present verification of their
12 situation.

13 And the food stamp document is obviously
14 too cumbersome and too difficult to manage for a
15 whole number of reasons. Including literacy or
16 second language.

17 There is some experience in decline in
18 bilingual workers in a number of offices and that
19 food stamps could be directly tied into that. The
20 fact that somebody is not able to communicate in
21 their primary language could lead to a lot of
22 miscommunication. There is a very high number of
23 immigrants, particularly Latinos in the Chicago
24 area.

1 There is a lot of confusion in the
2 training about eligibility of immigrants in the
3 particular categories. There is particularly
4 confusion about medical benefits for pregnant
5 immigrant women, whether they are eligible or not
6 and when their eligibility runs out are the
7 children all added to medical cases. I think that
8 problem needs to be examined.

9 The Child Care Parker Center at Union
10 reported in one of their newsletters there was a
11 legislation passed in that state around child care
12 workers' caseload sizes. I think that is something
13 the government should seriously look at.

14 If the agency repeatedly understaffs its
15 workforce, then I would think the federal
16 government has the right to over-site over the
17 number of cases that each worker has to manage. If
18 it's an unrealistic size, then I don't see how this
19 process can be accurate or timely.

20 MS. WATKINS: Diane, I'm wondering if you could
21 kind of wrap it up.

22 MS. STOKES: Sure.

23 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

24 MS. STOKES: Well, my -- in term of

1 accessibility of the offices, I think that needs to
2 be reviewed also. We have several in our local,
3 and one of them serves a whole northern -- north
4 side and suburban population. We have had a number
5 of clients complaining that it's a 50 mile one way
6 trip to get into that office and it's very
7 difficult for people to come there.

8 If it's moved out to the suburbs, then the
9 urban clients that are in that zip code will also
10 have that long ride. And there is no coverage for
11 their transportation at this point.

12 That's I think another reason why clients
13 are not getting what they need.

14 MS. WATKINS: Thank you very much.

15 We have a caller. Tim Donovan.

16 MR. DONOVAN: (Via telephone:) Yes.

17 MS. WATKINS: You want to go ahead.

18 This is Shirley Watkins with USDA.

19 MR. DONOVAN: Yes. Tim Donovan here. I have
20 only two very small issues to bring up, but they're
21 related I think.

22 First, as I've heard other people talk
23 about, the Food Stamp Program simply has to be
24 simplified, the application process and

1 recertification process.

2 But beyond that and connected with it,
3 there are states that have these terrible error
4 rates when they certify people that aren't eligible
5 or aren't eligible to receive at the rate that they
6 do receive coupons. Either they're shorted or
7 given too much. I think that's just almost
8 criminal how much is lost that way.

9 One of the initiatives that our department
10 has come up with is called reinvestment, and our
11 states are required to invest their own funds to
12 improve their error rate.

13 That might have made some sense in
14 beginning, but we have seen one reinvestment plan
15 follow another and follow another. And although
16 the money gets spent, it seems like it doesn't do
17 any good as far as improving the state's ability to
18 administer the program without errors and get the
19 coupon issuance the way it should be.

20 So if you want to get the benefits right,
21 I think first of all this program has to be
22 simplified. And to get the benefits right, maybe
23 the states have to be really penalized because they
24 are not doing a good job right now.

1 Thank you for the opportunity to speak my
2 mind.

3 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

4 I would just remind you that you need to
5 limit your comments from two to five minutes. So
6 if you could help us, there are a lot of people who
7 would like to speak this afternoon and we want to
8 make certain we can give everyone that opportunity.

9 Becky Wolfram.

10 MS. WOLFRAM: I'm from Minnesota and I
11 represent an organization called the Urban
12 Coalition. We are a research-based public policy
13 advocacy group. And I actually as part of my job
14 as hunger and poverty program officer and a member
15 of Food First Coalition, which is a coalition of
16 well over 40 organizations in Minnesota that are
17 concerned about food and hunger issues. So I'm
18 coming as their spokesperson today, so I have
19 comments from a number of people.

20 A lot of the suggestions were already made
21 so I will just kind of quick try to run through
22 them, but there are some that are specific to
23 Minnesota. Just some of the stories and I will
24 quickly go through those.

1 One of the things that is closest to my
2 heart is food stamps for legal immigrants.
3 Minnesota has chosen to extend not only food stamps
4 but input benefits to legal immigrants. However,
5 each year we have to come back fighting it seems
6 like to get those benefits extended.

7 Our state's legislators are saying well,
8 it's the federal government's job, they need to be
9 doing that. And that puts us in an awkward
10 position because while we believe that, we still
11 believe the state has to do something. It's not
12 like if you don't give food stamps to legal
13 immigrants, it's not like they just go away, they
14 go somewhere else. They go to a food pantry.

15 So I would really like to encourage the
16 USDA when reauthorization for the Food Stamp
17 Program is up to really push for coverage for all
18 legal immigrants.

19 I think that could also help with some of
20 the error rates we have. We have families that are
21 mixed status, families where the children are
22 citizens but the parents may not be, and that could
23 get pretty complicated. It's pretty hard to figure
24 out who's qualified and who's not, and it takes a

1 Ph.D. to figure out.

2 One of the other -- some of the other
3 suggestions I guess I will get to, I want to bring
4 some comments. This was from the director of
5 Minnesota Food Share. She said she had been going
6 around this state and having regional meetings, and
7 at these regional meetings some issues have come
8 up.

9 She says most of the families using food
10 stamps now are two income families. We don't have
11 documentation of their income, but regardless, they
12 still need their access to food shelves.

13 Actually, we will have that data at the
14 end of this summer. Currently in July we are doing
15 a five year hunger study of food shelves and
16 on-site food stamp programs in Minnesota so we will
17 have that information soon.

18 The food shelves in Minnesota have seen a
19 7 percent increase in usage in the federal past
20 year, and this is despite our strong economy and
21 the generous welfare program.

22 Another striking static is that in
23 September of 1997, 90 percent of food shelf
24 participants also received food stamps. In

1 September of 1999, 21 percent of food shelf
2 participants received food stamps. So a huge
3 decline in the number of families receiving food
4 stamps, but still needing food shelves.

5 We have a huge issue with families needing
6 to pay 50 percent to 80 percent of their income for
7 housing. The current vacancy rate in Minnesota in
8 the metropolitan Twin Cities area has been hovering
9 around 1 percent for well over a year now and also
10 the average rent has also been hovering around \$700
11 for a two bedroom apartment.

12 So for a low income family making just
13 above minimum wage -- most of our families living
14 on welfare are making I think around \$9 -- that is
15 definitely over the 30 percent of their income that
16 should go towards housing costs.

17 Along with housing, we have high child
18 care and high health care costs.

19 She said that Minnesota for sure would
20 definitely support raising the income limit on food
21 stamps to 185 percent of poverty.

22 Through her travel she has also heard that
23 the process of applying for food stamps is very
24 daunting, causes a barrier in and of itself. Many

1 low wage workers and families transitioning from
2 welfare to work are not in positions in which they
3 can take paid time off to apply for assistance
4 programs.

5 She says in rural areas we have not heard
6 of a food stamp office being opened on the evenings
7 or weekends, and this contributes to the issue of
8 access. Furthermore, it is often not worth three
9 to four hours of a person's time away from work or
10 more, depending on where they live, to fill out a
11 20-page application and complete what could be a
12 somewhat humiliating process, only to find out the
13 person is eligible for \$10 in food stamps.

14 In Minnesota we have a group called Jobs
15 Now Coalition, and they completed a job gap in
16 1998. In the Minneapolis/St. Paul area a person
17 would need to make \$15.37 per hour, or \$31,169
18 annually in order to make ends meet enough to cover
19 bare minimum costs. And this is a single parent
20 family of about two children. So that is well
21 above the 120 percent of poverty.

22 Some of the comments actually come from
23 participants in our program.

24 Many said the benefits were too small.

1 For example, 10 to \$12 and not worth the time off
2 work and transportation costs to apply, the dollar
3 amount was that insignificant.

4 The stigma attached to food stamps.
5 Especially in rural areas people are embarrassed to
6 apply because the neighbor might very well be the
7 person who is the cashier in the only grocery
8 store. So it is somewhat humiliating that way,
9 which I don't think we can really get around that.

10 Several reported that they just missed
11 eligible, but still had a need for food stamps.

12 For people who work, invasion of privacy
13 was mentioned. Many felt the process needed to be
14 streamlined.

15 Transportation to apply in rural areas is
16 a huge issue. The requirements to apply in person
17 were a huge barrier for some folks. Hours to apply
18 were not flexible.

19 I guess I will just get to the
20 recommendations that a number of people have who
21 have contacted me.

22 One, to pass the Hunger Relief Act.
23 To simplify the application and
24 recertification process.

1 To increase foods stamp eligibility to 185
2 percent of poverty.

3 To increase the minimum benefit level to
4 at least \$25. Some actually said more than that,
5 but the majority said \$25.

6 To allow for electronic recertification
7 and possibly application process either via e-mail,
8 the Internet, or fax.

9 Ease of the requirements related to car
10 ownership.

11 Raise the cap on excess shelter
12 deductions.

13 And something that the coalition, the Food
14 First Coalition has been working a little bit on is
15 trying to get food stamp workers in the community,
16 both in rural areas and at community organizations
17 within the urban areas. So basically going to
18 where the people are would help reduce some of the
19 barriers.

20 So I thank you for the opportunity to
21 speak and I think I'm the sole Minnesota advocate
22 here. So, thank you.

23 MS. WATKINS: Thank you very much.

24 Brian Jordan.

1 MR. JORDAN: Good afternoon. My name is
2 Brian Jordan. I'm president of the Illinois Food
3 Retailers Association, whose membership consists of
4 600 independently-owned grocery store operators
5 that operate approximately 1300 stores throughout
6 the State of Illinois.

7 I'd first like to thank the USDA for this
8 opportunity you have provided both industry and
9 clients to discuss the Food Stamp Program.

10 I will limit my verbal comments to the
11 application process that is currently required of
12 food retailers. And this application process
13 effects not only the retailers, but the clients as
14 well.

15 But I would first -- I first feel it's
16 important to just address one national issue, and
17 that is the issue of downtime in grocery stores.
18 Although Illinois clients and retailers were not
19 directly effected by the downtime experienced in
20 other states of late, the problems that they have
21 experienced are a concern to all of us.

22 When systems are down and manual vouchers
23 are required, stores all over the country, no
24 matter who the processing company is, report that

1 the time on hold waiting voice authorization is
2 entirely too long.

3 Downtime is always viewed by the client as
4 a retailer problem. Lines at the check out back
5 up, customers' tempers get short, and many times
6 customers, whether they're clients or not, walk out
7 leaving groceries, full baskets behind.

8 I implore the USDA to look at a more
9 streamlined approach to handling downtime situation
10 that is developing in the grocery stores.

11 Now to the issue of the food stamp
12 application process. And I guess this is a state
13 issue.

14 For the grocery store owner, it takes
15 entirely too long. We believe there to be
16 unnecessary requirements which cause delay in the
17 application process. And these delays cause
18 unnecessary and unacceptable hardships for both the
19 client and the food retailer who is trying to
20 establish a solid customer service base in a new
21 store location.

22 This situation is particularly burdensome
23 for retailers that operate other locations that
24 have already been authorized under the system and

1 have no history of any violations.

2 A similar situation occurs when a retailer
3 takes over a store that was previously authorized
4 under the Food Stamp Program. Customers that
5 normally would shop that location are now forced to
6 go elsewhere until the application process is
7 completed.

8 And in some instances, it has taken
9 anywhere from six to eight weeks from the date the
10 ownership transfer took place. Expedited
11 procedures must be considered for improving this
12 program.

13 The way the application process works is
14 that all retailers, or at least in some regions of
15 the state, must attend an initial training class
16 regardless of whether or not they are currently
17 authorized in other locations. Application forms
18 are not being accepted in the mail, but must be
19 delivered at each initial training class.

20 This is troublesome. Especially when
21 there is class availability problems.

22 We ask the Department two things. One, to
23 waive the class requirements, especially for
24 companies that have been and are currently

1 authorized in other locations. And two, to
2 consider looking at advances in modern technology
3 for training, such as CD ROMs.

4 Another problem regarding the application
5 process is that once the application is completed
6 and a representative from the store attends a
7 class, an inspection must occur. And this
8 inspection must occur within 30 days of
9 application. After the store's inspection is
10 complete, then final authorization is granted.

11 If a store location has been previously
12 authorized under a previous owner, possibly the
13 store inspection could be done at a later date.
14 But operation of the system can begin immediately
15 so that the current clients that shop at this
16 location are not inconvenienced.

17 I have other comments that I have
18 submitted in writing.

19 But once again, I would like to say thank
20 you for this review of the application process.

21 MS. WATKINS: Thank you very much.

22 Bob Horning.

23 MR. HORNING: My name is Bob Horning. I'm
24 coordinator of the Holy Assumption Food Pantry in

1 West Alice, Wisconsin. Thank you for offering us
2 this opportunity to express our views.

3 I have three points that I would like to
4 discuss. The first one being that the Department
5 of Agriculture and the federal government continue
6 to administer the programs through state level
7 government agencies, and do not allow private
8 for-profit or private nonprofit agencies to conduct
9 the certification interviews, determination of
10 benefit levels for application, applicant and
11 recipients of the Food Stamp Program.

12 Currently the State of Wisconsin has a
13 waiver request of USDA to allow a change to let
14 private agencies take this over. I oppose this as
15 coordinator of the pantry, and I further include
16 with my documents a copy of the Milwaukee County
17 Board of Supervisor's resolution in opposition to
18 this waiver against the State of Wisconsin.

19 Secondly, I recommend that they consider
20 paper products as being an item that could be
21 purchased with food stamps. Our pantry has been in
22 existence since 1979, and probably one of the
23 ongoing things that they constantly either ask
24 about or complain about is that they can't get

1 paper products such as toilet paper and things of
2 that nature. After a while of hearing these
3 complaints, our food pantry finally had to go out
4 and buy those things so that we can provides them.

5 Thirdly, I recommended that the minimal
6 dollar amount be reviewed and increased. Many of
7 our clients will not go through the registration
8 process because the amount they get is less than
9 \$15 or \$10 a month.

10 Most of them are retired on small pensions
11 or on Social Security and they spend their time
12 during the month going from our pantry to the next
13 pantry several blocks away getting food.

14 I don't have a suggestion as the minimal
15 amount to be raised. There have been several
16 suggestions here already.

17 I thank you for providing the opportunity
18 to engage in this Food Stamp Program discussion.

19 I also want to comment that our food
20 pantry has experienced a 33 percent increase in
21 participants in the first six months of this year
22 over last year. That's putting a big strain on our
23 food pantry. We need your help. Our clients need
24 your help.

1 Thank you.

2 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

3 Why don't we take a break for about 10 or

4 15 minutes and we will try to come back at 3:30.

5 (Whereupon, a short break was taken.)

6 MS. WATKINS: Jornell Holley.

7 MR. HOLLEY: Good afternoon. My name is

8 Jornell Holley. I'm with the Mothers-Daughters

9 United, Sisters for Equal Services. I also reside

10 in public housing.

11 As you know, or some people know, public

12 housing is now in transition and a lot of people

13 who are -- well, as well as the Welfare to Work

14 program. There are many issues that families are

15 faced with as well as while we're making in the

16 transition.

17 One of them is being able to find

18 affordable housing. When you're looking for

19 affordable housing with a fixed income, or in

20 transition like in the Welfare to Work situation,

21 you really need to have the food program in place.

22 If you become homeless in the

23 transformation process, as you can see on the front

24 page of the Chicago Sun Times today, there are

1 several other buildings that recently just went
2 down. So these families are looking for housing
3 and it's scarce.

4 So they may have to live with family
5 members or in shelters. And, you know, having an
6 address is kind of tough when the only place where
7 you lived at is, like, torn down.

8 So the situation about food would be a big
9 problem if they don't have an address and they get
10 caught up in the red tape of providing us with
11 verification of address. I don't know what the
12 people do, the P.O. box or whatever.

13 And I'm sure a lot of families who are --
14 like their older family member who does have a
15 home, with trying to pay utilities like gas and
16 electricity for the summer, and heat, they would
17 find it tough to take on a family member who is
18 dear to them or you may love them dearly. But this
19 is a hard thing to do for a family or a parent or a
20 relative that is on a fixed income as well.

21 I think I believe that a lot of the
22 program needs to work with community-based programs
23 so that the privatization won't be dominated in
24 that area. Basically because you have a lack of

1 appeal process.

2 An appeal process needs to be in place,
3 because a lot of people have a lot of situations
4 where a hearing would be necessary to rightfully
5 determine whether or not this family is eligible
6 for food stamp assistance or not.

7 I also work at my church. I'm a worker --
8 excuse me, I'm a volunteer. And these programs are
9 ran by volunteers. A lot of people leave their
10 jobs to come and work in the food pantry in
11 churches.

12 And sometimes the line is like going
13 around the block. A lot of people who I know who
14 are working who don't have enough money to meet
15 other needs, like their utility needs, they are
16 finding themselves going into this line. So a lot
17 of time where there was embarrassment with asking
18 for charity, it's not there anymore.

19 I also think that the senior citizens that
20 come through the food line, they really need the
21 assistance. Because they are -- they really have
22 worked most of the majority of their lives, and I
23 believe there should be some entitlement for the
24 seniors. It may not be, like, I know we've gotten

1 out of the age of entitlement, so -- but it should
2 be entitlement for senior citizens.

3 Because just to see them come through a
4 line with their bags and, you know, a lot of times
5 they are not given the type of foods that they
6 really should be using. Like a lot of the canned
7 goods, there is a lot of salt in there. And a lot
8 of times we are not able to give meat because we
9 don't have it.

10 They can't even carry the bags home. You
11 should just see them struggling. It's heart
12 breaking just to witness this. And you see that
13 they are trying. And some them are crippled and
14 it's hard to look at.

15 And the single families. The single
16 person who is, like, between the ages of 45 and 50,
17 they really need the help as well. Because they're
18 not used to charity and a lot of times they are
19 dislocated, displaced workers, and they don't have
20 the support of a family or husband or a family
21 member. And it's not always easy for them to get a
22 job because of their age.

23 Another thing, as far as, like, with the
24 USDA program, Food Stamp Program. It's very hard

1 when you go to a Welfare to Work, your expenses
2 become a lot more than just rent. You have the
3 public transportation, or, well, look at the recent
4 gas situation. Them people were just totally wiped
5 out.

6 I was just like done in buying four
7 gallons of gas for \$10. I didn't see the hand move
8 at all. And that turned into a lot. I still had
9 to go to these places. That interfered with a lot
10 of things I had to do because I could no longer pay
11 for gas.

12 Okay, and another thing about the child
13 only grant. I don't feel like grandparents should
14 have to take on the burden of providing what they
15 need for their medication. A lot of them pay for
16 their medications. They have been taking their
17 medication money to provide money for their
18 children -- excuse me, for their grandchildren that
19 live in their houses.

20 They are faced with saying I don't want
21 this child to go through the state, and I really
22 don't have the money to take care of him. And the
23 child only grant, the food stamps child only grant
24 should not involve or interfere with the person's

1 income. They should have food stamp grant only,
2 too, as well. Because that is a problem, too, with
3 the child only.

4 So I believe these programs, they should
5 have more community based programs.

6 And it wouldn't hurt to have an advisory
7 council or have an annual meeting of this sort to
8 determine where the people need this money.

9 Because a lot of people are saying there is abuse,
10 but it's more people that need this money than
11 people that are abusing it.

12 Then also for the food program, it should
13 be a lot more food given to the families who have
14 to take their children to a child care place where
15 there is a private provider.

16 Because a lot of times the child care
17 money is not given to the family for about three
18 months. So whoever is caring for your child until
19 that time, they have to also provide food for that
20 child in that setting, too, for those eight to ten
21 hours that it takes for you to go home and come
22 back and retrieve your child.

23 So thank you.

24 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

1 I would just to remind you to keep your
2 comments to the two to five minutes frame work, if
3 you can, so that we can get all the comments in
4 this afternoon.

5 Blanche Wade.

6 MS. WADE: Hello. How are you doing this
7 afternoon?

8 I'm Blanche Wade. I'm from Milwaukee,
9 Wisconsin. I'm an advocate for the Vincent County
10 Resource Center. I'm a case worker and welfare
11 worker.

12 I find myself dealing with single parent
13 families who have additional income, Welfare to
14 Work, with some of the same issues that we're
15 hearing today.

16 I also deal with single people with no
17 children with minimum wage jobs who are told they
18 are not eligible for food stamps. Their rent is
19 half their income, that's not including all the
20 other things they have to take care of, and they
21 find themselves right back at the food pantries and
22 the soup lines. And that is not called
23 self-sufficient.

24 Self-sufficient is a working person who

1 can take the money they work for and go to the
2 store and purchase their own food. That is
3 self-sufficient.

4 It also talks about the gross and not the
5 net. They receive not enough food stamps, and the
6 outcome, and I said before, is going right back to
7 the food pantries and the soup lines.

8 I'm just humbly asking you to take a look
9 at these issues and reevaluate to better assist the
10 families and individuals to get them to become
11 self-sufficient.

12 Just to summarize, four of the courses
13 that I would be asking and would hoping they become
14 enacted:

15 Raise the poverty income level to 185
16 percent.

17 Lessen the paperwork.

18 Come up with later business hours for the
19 working class family.

20 To educate the workers to decrease
21 miscommunication between the workers and the
22 customers.

23 Families are not fully self-supportive
24 when 90 percent of the time they are at the soup

1 kitchen and food pantries.

2 Thank you.

3 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

4 Mary Jeane Summers.

5 MS. SUMMERS: Hello. I'm a senior citizen from

6 Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

7 MS. WATKINS: Do you want to repeat your name?

8 MS. SUMMERS: Mary Jeane Summers. I'm a senior

9 citizen from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I came up on

10 the bus with everybody.

11 I just wanted to ask about the waiting

12 period that you have to wait to get the food

13 stamps. A lot of people that I know associated

14 with the -- have to wait like two or three weeks

15 before they can get food stamps. They won't even

16 give emergency food stamps.

17 So I would like to see maybe something

18 done about that.

19 Well, anyway, that is the most important

20 one I wanted to say.

21 Thank you.

22 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

23 Dorothy Ninham.

24 MS. NINHAM: Hello. Dorothy Ninham. And I

1 just wanted to find out, everybody said this
2 before, but about raising the food stamps. You get
3 \$22 a month, that's not enough to feed people.
4 There is living expenses.
5 There it is. Nothing left. See if you
6 can do something about raising that.
7 Thank you.
8 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.
9 Leah Wallace.
10 MS. WALLACH: Good afternoon. My name is Leah
11 Wallace. I'm here with the Hunger Task Force. I'm
12 an outreach worker for Hunger Task Force and I'm
13 very proud to do what I do.
14 Where I fall in this category is that I'm
15 also -- I'm a former recipient of the Food Stamp
16 Program and I suffered a great loss being on food
17 stamps because I found myself being sanctioned for
18 many reasons.
19 What I'm asking is that we live in great
20 country. We do a lot of great things. We have
21 great defense, everything. But it seems like the
22 hardest thing to do is to feed the hungry people.
23 And I have a real big problem with that.
24 In my job I go door knocking. I sit at

1 food pantries. I talk to the people so I know
2 exactly how they feel. And I just want you to take
3 a little time to imagine what it's like to live off
4 of \$10 for a whole 30 days. That is virtually
5 impossible.

6 It's heart breaking to go to those homes
7 and talk to those families and see those children
8 without anything to eat. You can only help so many
9 people with the resources you have.

10 So I'm asking you today that you consider
11 the amount to be raised to at least \$75. I think
12 that a person can survive on at least \$75 if they
13 are a single person.

14 The way that things are going up, the cost
15 is devastating to families. So I'm asking that you
16 consider that as everybody else has been asking
17 you.

18 But that has been a big problem, not being
19 able to get the food that the families need. And I
20 just want you to consider that if these people were
21 your relatives, wouldn't you feed them and wouldn't
22 you consider giving them something to eat? And
23 that's what it's coming down to, being able to feed
24 the hungry.

1 And that is all I have to say this
2 afternoon.

3 Thank you.

4 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

5 Nancy Belle.

6 MS. BELLE: I'd like to say thank you for
7 giving me the opportunity to speak. I'm a member
8 of the community that was surveyed. I live on the
9 south side of Milwaukee in zip code 53204.

10 Our neighborhood is predominantly Spanish,
11 but it is also very diverse and we are a low income
12 neighborhood.

13 We have over the past several months come
14 up with some problems and solutions to the problems
15 through the guidance of the Hunger Task Force in
16 Milwaukee.

17 Some of the problems that we've come up
18 with is that too many documents are required. In
19 many cases there are language barriers.

20 Along with that, also I'd like to talk
21 about body language. Because different cultures
22 act differently when under pressure and when under
23 stress and a lot of times it's misinterpreted.

24 There are also conditions of work

1 requirements. Income is based on the gross, not
2 the net. Basing income on overtime, grown kids
3 living with parents.

4 And I can talk about this because I have
5 an 18-year-old daughter who just moved home, who
6 just remarried and has two children and suddenly I
7 have four extra people in my house. And my income
8 during the summer is zero.

9 I do work and try to do what I can because
10 I'm a substitute teacher during the school year.
11 My income during the school year is too high, which
12 put me in a position that I have to apply for food
13 stamps.

14 \$10 is not worth the hassle. The amount
15 receiving is too low. Pending status verification
16 is required, and in this case too I can reiterate
17 on because when I go in for verification I have to
18 prove that school is out. It's obvious that school
19 is out, because every mother knows it is.

20 So I have to wait until I receive a letter
21 from central services that I'm no longer working
22 because school is out.

23 Undocumented residents with documented
24 children. Frequent appointments and quarterly

1 reviews.

2 This too is difficult for me. If I am
3 working and I just get back to subbing because I'm
4 called by the day and I'm only paid by the days
5 that I work. So having to go to meetings along
6 with a child who is handicapped and conditions
7 where I have to leave constantly to take care of
8 her problems.

9 Some of the solutions that we came up
10 with:

11 That people should be informed of their
12 rights.

13 Should allow telephone interviews for
14 people who are physically unable to come or do not
15 have transportation.

16 Conduct reviews less often.

17 Improve the verification process.

18 Make additional resource information
19 available.

20 And I looked at some of the points that I
21 myself have encountered, and one of the things was
22 that my money was gone before I can finally make an
23 application.

24 I have no money. The end of the school

1 year ends, my checks ends. And by the time I am
2 able to verify the information that is needed, I'm
3 with no income. And, yes, I hit food pantries and
4 I have gone to a meal program down the street.

5 And this is kind of embarrassing for me
6 because I do teach in the community and I have
7 students who live in my neighborhood who know me as
8 a teacher. That's very embarrassing to go into
9 that. Or I have a principal serving me milk at a
10 milk site. That's not too cool either. So it is
11 very hard.

12 And I think one of the big things that I
13 found is communication problems in dealing with
14 social workers. Because like I said, they don't
15 always understand the cultural differences. And
16 maybe someone sitting up rather boldly, may not be
17 that he is bold at all and wants to start an
18 argument. It may just be part of that culture. Or
19 someone coming up to you at close range. That may
20 be part of their culture, but it may not be part of
21 the culture of the social workers that are dealing
22 with people. And they take it as a threat and call
23 security to come and remove this person applying
24 for food stamps.

1 So these are kind of issues that we have
2 found in our community, and that I myself have
3 encountered. And I ask that you do something to
4 help the communication and the training of the
5 social workers so that they better understand the
6 different diverse cultures and the reactions to
7 people when they are under stress and how they
8 react to different people.

9 And I thank you for giving me this time.

10 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

11 William Acosta.

12 MR. ACOSTA: (Through Interpreter:) He
13 introduced himself, William from Milwaukee. A
14 bunch of them had got together for three meetings.
15 At the third meeting some people from around the
16 state got together and got together this list.

17 A number of times they will find the right
18 people, the people who know what the law is and
19 what the rights are. But these people aren't able
20 to explain to the people who need to know or are
21 unwilling to explain to the people what their
22 rights are. Even after an interview they are still
23 sort of left in a mystery of what they need to know
24 or what they need to do.

1 He is just thanking Heather Dummmler
2 (phonetic) and Alicia. These are two people that
3 have worked with this group to explain just what we
4 were just talking about a minute ago, how other
5 people weren't able to communicate what their
6 rights are, where they need to go. So these two
7 people have helped them considerably in both those
8 situations.

9 Again, that group that got together. They
10 organized what they were discussing into those
11 problems and then right below you will notice the
12 solutions. So you will find the same order on the
13 list, the solutions to the problems that are listed
14 above.

15 Thank you.

16 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

17 Sonia Castro.

18 MS. CASTRO: (Through Interpreter:) Both she
19 and her husband have diabetes. So they have gone,
20 and the only thing -- food stamps were not
21 offered. Is there like a food dispensary?

22 So the only assistance that they have been
23 given is \$10 worth of food stamps.

24 And on top of that, they have been asked

1 from 8:00 o'clock to 1:00 o'clock in the afternoon
2 to work in an office as part of eligibility. So
3 from 8:00 until 1:00 o'clock working on the
4 computer, both her and her husband.

5 Are you clear on that? Because I'm not
6 sure if I am.

7 MS. WATKINS: They are requiring her to work.

8 MEMBER OF THE AUDIENCE: Could I translate?

9 She is trying to say they are both
10 diabetic and they applied the food stamps and they
11 only get \$10 for month. And for that \$10 a month,
12 she has to find work from 8:00 in the morning until
13 1:00 o'clock in the afternoon for this \$10 a month.

14 And they are both diabetics and she has a
15 doctor's statement saying that she can't work.

16 MS. CASTRO: (Through Interpreter:) And the
17 complicating issue is with the diabetes, a special
18 diet. But the requirements that they are giving is
19 this work requirement from 8:00 to 1:00 and the
20 benefits that they are getting for all of this.
21 So, you know --

22 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

23 Maria Asia.

24 MS. ASIA: (Through Interpreter:) My name is

1 Maria Asia. My problem is the doctor has
2 prohibited me from working right now. She is
3 under medical treatment. And what she has been
4 told at the office is that she is not eligible for
5 any kind of assistance because she doesn't have
6 payments. Apparently where she lives there is a
7 grant, but on the other hand she has no income.

8 But because she wasn't able to show, you
9 know, a list of different expenses she has, that
10 made her ineligible for assistance.

11 She has brought to the office a letter
12 from the doctor basically to explain that because
13 of the medications she is unable to work. She has
14 taken that to the office and yet the only
15 assistance is the \$15 in food stamps.

16 Thank you.

17 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

18 Ana Gonzalez.

19 MS. GONZALEZ: (Through Interpreter:) She says
20 that recognizing the importance of the food stamps,
21 but the consequences of receiving it. There is a
22 number of consequences.

23 There is a number of drawbacks that they
24 have to suffer by going and applying and receiving

1 food stamps.

2 Living with her is a daughter with two
3 children, and the daughter had applied for food
4 stamps and has been denied because again it's her
5 mother that is paying the rent and not the
6 daughter. But they also are in need of assistance
7 there. That her daughter had gone and, you know,
8 she tried to make a convincing argument and
9 couldn't get anywhere.

10 So what did happen was that she went and
11 she made her case and she made her case over a
12 period of about three months and finally was able
13 to get some assistance. But it took that kind of
14 struggle before she got assistance.

15 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

16 Peter Anderson.

17 MR. ANDERSON: I'm a member of AFSCME, Local
18 2856 and a TANF case worker. And just to touch on
19 a few of the issues of TANF recipients and food
20 stamps.

21 There is an immense pressure on TANF case
22 workers to help get their clients employed and off
23 the rolls. And in this process, a lot of clients
24 get cut off or what we call swapped to a medical

1 only case.

2 This can lead to interruptions in their
3 food stamps. Even though they are eligible for
4 stamps, there can be an interruption and they get
5 cancelled or sometimes they get swapped over to
6 medical only and the food stamps have to be
7 reentered into the system.

8 I would say this emphasis on employment
9 for TANF recipients means that a lot of times food
10 stamp recertifications may get overlooked. They
11 may not get processed as timely as they need to be
12 because of this overwhelming emphasis on getting
13 clients off of assistance, finding jobs.

14 A lot of the jobs that the clients get are
15 very low paying jobs with low benefits. Clients
16 end up with reduced TANF grants and reduced stamps,
17 and I would say a lot of them end up hardly better
18 off in terms of their standard of living, whether
19 they are still getting a small TANF grant or cut
20 clearly off.

21 When a case is cancelled due to the
22 employment exceeding the income, the case worker
23 then has to set up a brand new food stamp case for
24 the client, and this can delay food stamps in some

1 cases.

2 So there is a lot of stress in the office,
3 and this emphasis on getting people off of aid,
4 cancelling cases, this can lead to food stamp
5 errors and also delay benefits for the clients.

6 Thank you.

7 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

8 Clement Peter Berg, Jr.

9 MR. BERG, JR.: Hi. I just wanted to say that
10 it should be fair and \$10 a week doesn't get it for
11 99 percent of the people. It should be fair and
12 just for everyone.

13 That's all I have to say. Thank you.

14 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

15 Bridget Nelson.

16 MS. NELSON: Good afternoon. My name is
17 Bridget Nelson. I'm an advocacy coordinator for
18 the Hunger Action Coalition of Michigan in Detroit,
19 Michigan.

20 Many families in Michigan, particularly
21 working families, are unable to receive food stamps
22 because their earnings in the household are
23 suddenly above the gross income limit.

24 Despite earned income, many of these

1 families are unable to meet their basic food needs
2 because they have extremely high housing costs,
3 high child care costs, and/or pay a significant
4 share of their income to support children in other
5 households.

6 All of these expenses reduce the income a
7 family has available to purchase food, often to the
8 point that they would be eligible for food stamps
9 if only they had met the gross income test.

10 While some families in Michigan are able
11 to bypass the gross income test by become
12 categorically eligible, many other families are
13 forced to try and make ends meet. Making ends meet
14 often simply means that a family must choose
15 between paying for rent or buying food.

16 Raising the gross income threshold to 185
17 percent of the poverty line would insure that lower
18 income families with high housing costs, travel
19 costs and other work related expenses such as child
20 care are able to access the critical nutritional
21 assistance that they need.

22 Raising the gross income threshold to 185
23 percent of the poverty also brings the eligibility
24 levels for the food stamps in line with other

1 noncash support programs for families, making the
2 eligibility determination simpler for case workers.

3 In Michigan, Medicaid, child daycare
4 services and other TANF support services are
5 available to families at or below 185 percent of
6 poverty.

7 Eliminating the gross income test is
8 another way to insure that low income families with
9 high expenses have access to critical nutritional
10 assistance with food stamps.

11 Many working families who live in rural
12 areas or are unable to afford housing close to
13 their jobs must commute considerable distances. In
14 Michigan, and in Detroit in particular, public
15 transportation tends to be unreliable when
16 available. It is hardly an option for persons
17 working the second or third shift, nor is it
18 available on the route that many low income parents
19 take to work.

20 USDA has taken important steps to expand
21 the types of vehicles available to eligible persons
22 through category eligibility and to reexamination
23 as to how value is computed.

24 Many states, including Michigan, allow

1 cash assistance recipients to keep one vehicle per
2 family, or one vehicle per working household
3 member, whichever is greater. A similar approach
4 could be taken with the Food Stamp Program.

5 Unfortunately, USDA's current outreach
6 efforts aimed at increasing participation by
7 eligible household continues to conflict with the
8 intense pressure states feel to reduce their error
9 rates.

10 In Michigan, this pressure has led to a
11 "when in doubt, deny" approach, resulting in, by
12 our estimates, thousands of inappropriate denials.
13 Indeed, this pressure is felt so strongly that it
14 has manifested itself in policies such as expedited
15 food stamps, which do not even count as quality
16 control errors.

17 We would also suggest that you eliminate
18 the mini reviews. Michigan has chosen to require
19 working families to go through redetermination
20 every three months. The burdensome paperwork
21 required by constant verification of income and
22 expenses, by the time one three month
23 redetermination has finished, another has begun.

24 This has caused numerous families to lose

1 food stamps completely.

2 Advocates throughout the state report that
3 clients find verifying earnings increasingly
4 difficult the more frequently that verification is
5 required. Employers, day care providers, and
6 landlords simply do not understand why they must
7 send in the same form they just filled out three
8 months ago.

9 Many participants in the Food Stamp
10 Program report that their employers, landlords,
11 doctors and child care providers had become so
12 tired of sending in verification forms, they simply
13 refuse to send them in anymore, leaving them unable
14 to complete the redetermination process.

15 Efforts by advocates in Michigan to
16 encourage the state to move for a six month
17 redetermination instead of three months, thereby
18 relieving some of the burden, have been stymied due
19 to Michigan's fear of increased QC errors and
20 potential fines by USDA.

21 USDA should require states to set
22 recertification periods of no less than six months.
23 Exceptions could be made for households with
24 extremely unstable circumstances. However, USDA

1 should be explicit about which circumstances could
2 trigger a certification period of less than six
3 months.

4 Currently food stamp offices are
5 prohibited from requiring a household to verify a
6 change in income or utility costs of less than \$35
7 per month, unless the information is incomplete,
8 inaccurate, inconsistent, or outdated.

9 USDA should raise this threshold from \$25
10 to \$100. The \$25 threshold is particularly
11 burdensome for low income working families. Low
12 wage jobs are by their very nature unstable. Work
13 schedules change from week to week, as do number of
14 hours work. Some low wage jobs, such as
15 waitressing tables, can have income fluctuations of
16 several hundred dollars from month to month.

17 These are the recommendations being made
18 by the statewide coalition and the staff of the
19 Hunger Action Coalition.

20 Thank you.

21 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

22 Diane Doherty.

23 MS. DOHERTY: I feel like I should have a bible
24 saying I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth,

1 and nothing but the truth. I appreciate that
2 you're here and your traveling around the
3 country --

4 MS. WATKINS: Diane, if could you restate your
5 name.

6 MS. DOHERTY: I'm sorry. I thought everybody
7 knew.

8 My name is Diane Doherty. I'm one of the
9 managing partners of the Illinois Hunger Coalition,
10 which is a statewide anti-hunger organization.

11 Again, I am pleased that you're traveling
12 around the country to listening to people like so
13 many who have testified already to hear their
14 stories and to really understand more intensely
15 what the lives are like of people who live with low
16 incomes. Many of whom are working poor, many of
17 whom have serious health care problems.

18 On behalf of the Illinois Hunger
19 Coalition, I would like to share some information
20 with you about the realities of our state and what
21 people face in this state.

22 One in eight children in Illinois are
23 hungry. 8.2 of households are food insecure, and
24 3.1 percent of households in the state have food

1 insecurity with hunger.

2 We still have a poverty rate of 10.1
3 percent, even though we had a decline of food stamp
4 households, people on food stamp rolls of 27
5 percent since 1995. Our welfare rolls have
6 declined by 60 percent.

7 At the same time, the fair market rent for
8 a studio apartment in Chicago is \$527 a month. We
9 are the 12th worst state in the nation for the gap
10 between income and housing and rent. 40 percent of
11 all households cannot afford the market rate for a
12 two bedroom apartment, and yet people have fallen
13 off the rolls. 60 percent off welfare, 27 percent
14 off food stamp households.

15 We actually have a panel of recipients
16 themselves speaking, as well as one of our local
17 food banks, to talk about what we are seeing at the
18 same time that people are being thrown off the
19 rolls.

20 The other reality is work, and that work
21 doesn't pay. For every six workers in Chicago,
22 there is one entry level job available. In East
23 St. Louis, there are nine workers for every entry
24 job available.

1 And when it comes to living wage jobs --
2 which is what people need, right, in order to be
3 able to feed their kids, clothe their kids, and
4 provide transportation, child care and education --
5 for every living wage job there are 222 job seekers
6 for an entry level job.

7 Welfare reform is what they expected.
8 What happened when they cut \$30 billion from the
9 Food Stamp Program is making more people ineligible
10 and reducing benefits.

11 The other thing that has happened is that
12 people don't know they're eligible. And there is
13 an incredible amount of misinformation and fear,
14 especially for immigrants to actually apply for
15 benefits for which they are eligible.

16 The other thing that is happening is
17 something that congressperson Tony Hall has called
18 the criminalization for the need for public
19 assistance. Again, I think we have demonized
20 poverty so much and people who are falling through
21 the cracks that there is such an effort to get
22 people off the rolls that we are scaring people who
23 really are truly eligible and discouraging them
24 from getting the benefits that they know they are

1 eligible for.

2 USDA fortunately has a new study released
3 which just verifies what we've known for a couple
4 of years. That the booming economy doesn't explain
5 the unprecedented drop in food stamp rolls. And
6 according to the economic research service at USDA,
7 they couldn't account for more than half of the
8 decline in food stamp were involved in the economy
9 or jobs or whatever else we think is happening,
10 which really isn't.

11 More of our people are relying on food
12 pantries, shelters, and soup kitchens and ending up
13 in shelters. Ending up homeless.

14 Quick recommendations. Restore foods
15 stamps to all legal immigrants.

16 According to the USDA study that I just
17 cited, 42 percent of the decline in food stamp
18 rolls nationwide among citizens. Legal immigrants
19 rather.

20 One of the things that we've done here in
21 Illinois is we do have the state food program for
22 immigrants for a certain number of the folks that
23 have been terminated, not all. And it's widely
24 under-used.

1 And again, it's not because these folks
2 are not hungry. It's not because they are not
3 eligible. It's because they're afraid of what is
4 going to happen if they go and apply because of all
5 the publicity around it and again the demonization
6 and criminalization of poverty.

7 The second thing I would say is restore
8 food stamps to 18 to 50 year olds without dependent
9 children living with them.

10 We are really very fortunate that our food
11 stamp administration has every single year applied
12 for the waivers so we have them. So we have
13 progressive people at the state level trying to
14 keep the safety net a little bit more stable for
15 people.

16 And we know that whether it's single
17 people in Chicago that can't -- we haven't had a
18 general assistance program in Chicago for many
19 years -- or people in southern Illinois where coal
20 mines have been closed down and there are
21 absolutely no jobs for people down there.

22 The third thing is to raise the food stamp
23 level to either 185 percent or 200 percent of the
24 federal poverty line.

1 Four, remove the cap on the deduction for
2 housing costs. Make it compatible to what we do
3 for the elderly or persons with disability. It
4 doesn't make any sense. People are forced to
5 choose between either heating their home or paying
6 their rent.

7 Allow foods stamp recipients, number five,
8 to own one car. The current value of 4650 is a bit
9 of a joke. It's only increased by 3 percent since
10 1977, while the cost of used cars has increased by
11 170 percent.

12 Many of our people can only find jobs in
13 the suburbs, and they have no transportation and
14 then they lose their jobs. In rural areas people
15 can't exist without a car. Even some of our
16 families who were going to testify today and
17 couldn't make it had to travel three hours to an
18 IDHS office to try to get subsidized child care,
19 food stamps for their families.

20 Also, increase the value of the Thrifty
21 Food Plan by at least 10 percent, again to make up
22 for the cost of feeding individuals and families.

23 The other thing, seven, that I think USDA
24 could do is to do a public education meeting and

1 campaign to destigmatize the food and nutrition
2 programs. To let people know, legal immigrants,
3 working poor families, that they may in fact be
4 eligible for the Food Stamp Program.

5 Eight, encourage states to do state
6 outreach and provide more incentives than there
7 currently are to do that.

8 Nine, as a minimum, benefit for seniors
9 should be a minimum of \$75 a month with
10 recertification one time a year. I would add \$75 a
11 month for persons with disabilities as well.

12 And ten, encourage the states to recertify
13 by mail or phone when possible. And as many people
14 have said today, every six months for working poor
15 families or folks who have been on TANF as opposed
16 to quarterly, which we now have.

17 And also, I think the states need
18 incentives to improve their technology and
19 training. I don't want to bash case workers
20 because part of our panel are case workers from
21 IDHS, but there needs to be a lot of training
22 because things have changed so dramatically.

23 Also, I would include that we talk to
24 people about others being treated with respect and

1 dignity.

2 In terms of the limit at 130 percent of
3 the poverty line, we know the families are
4 struggling when they are living at between 130 and
5 185 percent of the federal poverty line. If we
6 made it compatible with the child health insurance
7 program and WIC, again it would make it easier for
8 people to understand. We would have a more
9 seamless system.

10 Also, according to the World Institute, to
11 achieve the goal of reducing hunger to zero and
12 food insecurity without hunger to about 5 percent
13 of the United State's population over a five year
14 period, it could almost be achieved by guaranteeing
15 that all households have income at or above 185
16 percent of the poverty threshold. Again, if we did
17 that for food stamps, we would go a long way to
18 helping people.

19 I mentioned the shelter cap. The high
20 housing costs for low income families means that
21 they are not able to meet their basic needs. So,
22 for instance, in Chicago, a family with an income
23 of \$12,000 a year without a housing subsidy, they
24 pay \$762 a month for the market rate to get an

1 apartment at 76 percent of their income.

2 And we have a 1-800 hunger hot line where
3 a day doesn't go by that we don't have 15 to 30
4 people call to tell us they are paying 70, 80,
5 sometimes even 90 percent of their income to
6 housing. It's a decision people are being forced
7 to make and it just isn't fair.

8 So the food stamp allotment would be
9 raised if it would be raised by eliminating the
10 shelter cap again it would help families.

11 The Thrifty Food Plan is totally
12 inadequate. In '96, as you know, Congress phased
13 in reduce monthly food stamp benefits so that by
14 the year 2002 average recipient's monthly food
15 spending probably would increase by 10 percent. So
16 that is why we say increase the value by 10
17 percent. .71 cents per meal on average is just not
18 realistic at all.

19 And for elderly and disabled persons, they
20 should have a minimum food stamp benefit of \$75 a
21 month, and one of our members will talk about it.
22 A person with serious health disabilities.

23 As I mentioned, the recertification once a
24 year for the elderly. And as other folks had

1 talked about, a transitional period for families
2 going off TANF and recertification twice a year.
3 And also being able to recertify on the phone.
4 I have had two women working for me who
5 are Welfare to Work and between the two of them
6 they had six missed days to go and try to get their
7 food stamp benefits to the correct amount. I would
8 suspect if I weren't working for the Illinois
9 Hunger Coalition they probably would have lost
10 their jobs.
11 Also, I have had families where the
12 mothers are undergoing chemotherapy and a bus ride
13 of two hours to get to the food stamp office while
14 she is vomiting and sick. And she was terminated
15 from her food stamps because she didn't make it to
16 her interview. Again I think a phone call or a
17 fax.
18 MS. WATKINS: Could you wrap it up, please.
19 MS. DOHERTY: Sure.
20 Finally, I think that USDA has really
21 required that states be overly focused on quality
22 control compliance. So I think that the state's
23 efforts to restore people who have been illegally
24 cut and get working poor families on food stamps

1 will be halfhearted at best.

2 We can't expect state administrators to be
3 aggressive about increasing the rolls when they
4 know they are going to be slapped with a penalties
5 and they will be treated the way we have been
6 treated in the past because we have a high food
7 stamp error rates.

8 Finally, just a personal note. I worked
9 for close to a decade in a shelter in the shadow of
10 the White House in D.C., and there were a couple of
11 occasions when I actually got on a bus and went to
12 another city where I didn't know anybody and I
13 didn't have any identification and I slept out on
14 the street overnight.

15 I really recommend that folks go to
16 offices, food stamp offices in different cities
17 around the country, and just try to experience what
18 it's like. That the people going in and asking for
19 food stamps and how they are treated and also the
20 feeling that they have of walking away feeling very
21 undignified simply because they don't have enough
22 to eat.

23 Thank you.

24 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

1 Reverend Marga Fernandez.

2 And I would just remind you to keep your

3 comments brief. Thank you.

4 (Whereupon, Rev. Fernandez

5 spoke in a foreign language.)

6 REV. FERNANDEZ: Did you understand what I

7 said?

8 MS. WATKINS: No. I unfortunately do not speak

9 Spanish.

10 REV. FERNANDEZ: That is exactly the point I

11 wanted to talk about today. Many people go to the

12 office of the food stamps and they don't speak

13 English, and they have --

14 MS. WATKINS: Could you step back just a little

15 bit from the mike. Thank you.

16 REV. FERNANDEZ: -- and they have a terrible

17 frustration where nobody understands what they say

18 and where nobody can explain to them what it is,

19 why or where are the application.

20 So I have been translating. That is just

21 one of the complaints that they do. They don't

22 have people who speak Spanish. They don't have

23 translators. They don't have nobody who can help

24 us to assist us and to explain to us if we have the

1 right or we don't have the right to apply for the
2 stamps.

3 The other issue that I want to talk today
4 is about the -- and I'm not only talking about the
5 Hispanic people. I'm talking about all immigrants
6 that came here around the world. They have the
7 same frustrations and all the frustrations is
8 because they are illegal in this country. They say
9 we don't qualify.

10 But many of these people is working and
11 their children are American citizens. And because
12 they are not legal resident, they don't receive any
13 food stamps for the children.

14 Many times I talk to them. You have the
15 right, you don't qualify because you are not
16 American citizen or legal resident, but your
17 children are American citizen and they are hungry
18 and the Department of Human Services must give some
19 kind of food stamps.

20 Sometimes they say but we can't understand
21 what they say. Try to talk to the supervisor.
22 Sometime I have to go with them. And sometime or
23 many times I have an argument with the case workers
24 because they say no, these people don't qualify and

1 I have to tell them you are wrong. Completely
2 wrong.

3 The other thing that I want to talk so
4 fast -- I have one minute more -- is the rude --
5 the very rude attitude that some of the case
6 workers pay with the clients.

7 You see the ladies who were here. They
8 made complaints about them. They made complaints
9 about no translator. They made complaints about
10 they don't receive only \$10. That's is
11 ridiculous. Nobody can buy anything with \$10.
12 Maybe two gallons of milk, that's it. No more.

13 And the children, they don't ask them do
14 you have money. They said we are hungry. That's
15 the point.

16 Thank you very much.

17 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

18 Dominic Hoppa.

19 MR. HOPPA: I am Dominic Hoppa. I live in
20 Zion, Illinois, which is in Lake County. I moved
21 to Illinois from Wisconsin in May of '97 when I was
22 told that I would have to move to a nursing home
23 because of severe diabetes, and I'm legally blind.

24 I have had diabetes since I was 13 years

1 old. Until April '96, I held down a full-time
2 job. And then in 1999 I had a pancreas and kidney
3 transplant in Chicago.

4 In 1997 my food stamps started to decrease
5 from \$125 a month to \$36 a month. The reason given
6 was I was getting \$676 a month for disability.

7 By the time I paid my expenses, which
8 included some of my medicine, I only had \$8 left
9 for food. The state expects me to eat daily on
10 \$1.10 a day. Remember, I'm a severe diabetic who
11 must eat properly.

12 In 1998 my food stamps decreased to \$24 a
13 month because of the increase in disability
14 benefits.

15 Every time I went to the IDHS offices
16 someone always had to take me. It never failed
17 that I would sit in the office for three to four
18 hours at a time when I would meet with the case
19 worker.

20 They would talk down to me. For instance,
21 when I told the case workers that I needed new
22 clothes, she just said that's not my problem. Then
23 when I stated that my food stamps were so low I
24 could not buy the right kinds of food, she angrily

1 told me that the state is giving you the right
2 amount. Food stamps does not allow for medical
3 expenses.

4 At another time, a case worker told me if
5 you don't like it here, go back to Wisconsin.
6 Because sometimes I would go up to Wisconsin to see
7 my daughter on the bus. Sometimes I would end up
8 in the hospital by the time I got to her house.

9 A case worker told me that all I wanted to
10 do was get attention and go to the hospital and
11 not -- and that there was no daughter.

12 The case workers were constantly losing me
13 my papers, telling me that they didn't have all the
14 information even though I supplied it every time I
15 went to the office.

16 How would you feel as an a 49-year-old
17 male and being treated this way? I really felt
18 degraded to the point of depression. It really
19 made me feel worthless. I kept telling myself that
20 I have worked all these years and this is what I
21 get.

22 But I was getting worse until I had the
23 transplants. Eating properly was very important to
24 keep the new pancreas and kidney functioning. One

1 day when at a food pantry in Waukegan they gave me
2 the number to the Hunger Coalition, Illinois Hunger
3 Coalition.

4 After working with them the case worker
5 calls and says that I will be getting \$127 in food
6 stamps a month. These phone calls have cleared up
7 some of the problems that I've had with my case.

8 It is clear that case workers do not know
9 the policy and regulations. Surely they do not
10 know how to treat people who are already
11 suffering.

12 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

13 We have another phone call.

14 Caller, you're on the line.

15 MR. ARNOLD (Via telephone:) Okay.

16 MS. WATKINS: Please state your name.

17 MR. ARNOLD: My name is John Arnold. I am the
18 executive director of the Second Harvest, Glenersof
19 West Food Bank up in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

20 Two quick comments. One, what we are
21 feeling we most substantively need is easily
22 readable, understandable, reproducible information
23 about the Food Stamp Program that could be posted
24 in food pantries and other charity agencies or

1 duplicated and given out as flyers.

2 There are just huge numbers of people out
3 there who do not know about the Food Stamp
4 Program. It's kind of amazing. It doesn't seem to
5 be possible. But that does seem to be true, they
6 don't know that it exists. They don't realize they
7 might be eligible and they certainly don't know how
8 and where to apply.

9 And so if USDA or the state could begin
10 disseminating that kind of information out through
11 the charity network I think it would help a
12 tremendous amount.

13 That was it.

14 MS. WATKINS: Thank you, caller.

15 Sister Pam Falter.

16 MS. PRUBENELLI: Hello. We had a small
17 change. I'm not sister Pam, I'm Jessica Prubenelli
18 (phonetic) from the Chicagoland Hunger Federation.
19 We are located here on the west side of Chicago.
20 I'm going to be very brief today.

21 I just want to talk to you about the food
22 stamp problems that we have with our clients who
23 apply to be in our job training program.

24 We have a culinary training program that

1 we offer to anybody who is homeless, who is Welfare
2 to Work, who is underemployed or anybody who is
3 income eligible.

4 Those people, when they apply for our
5 program, they become -- they get a \$50 stipend per
6 week. That \$50 stipend is to go for transportation
7 costs. That way they will be able to get to and
8 from the program every day.

9 It is a full-time program, Monday through
10 Friday, 9:30 to 3:30. There is really not much
11 time for mothers with children to get a full-time
12 job and to go to this training program.

13 The point of our training program is to
14 help people get into jobs where their salaries are
15 going to be anywhere from \$6.50 to \$8.50. And
16 while that's not very high above the minimum wage,
17 it is still enough for them to get on the road to
18 self-sufficiency.

19 We have clients who when they are in our
20 program are cut from their food stamps. And I'm
21 not talking about the food stamps being increased,
22 their food stamps are completely cut. And I think
23 it's pretty unfair for a mother who is trying to
24 raise her children and who is trying to get into a

1 job that is going to provide for more money to
2 support those children is being cut from programs
3 that are virtually there to help them take that
4 path to self sufficiency.

5 Thank you.

6 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

7 Stephen Edwards.

8 MR. EDWARDS: Hello. My name is Steve Edwards,
9 the president of the American Federation of State
10 County and Municipal Employees, Local 2858.

11 I'm a case worker at an office a few
12 blocks away from here, and before I came here today
13 I pulled a couple of things off notice boards.
14 Motivational messages.

15 "Together we are dedicated to achieving
16 the highest quality of human services through
17 visionary leadership, team work, communication
18 and relationship building."

19 And the food stamp accuracy management
20 vision statement, this is the latest thing:

21 "Together we will meet the food needs of
22 our clients by creating a work force dedicated
23 to issuing all food stamp benefits with
24 accuracy, timeliness and compassion."

1 Needless to say, at the bottom of one of
2 these someone has already written "yeah, right."
3 Actually, about 18 months ago I was going
4 to another office down the road here to defend a
5 young man, Hector. Very educated, very well
6 intentioned young guy who had come to Chicago. Had
7 been working as a teacher and took a job as a case
8 worker because he wanted to work with people.
9 And he was in about his fourth month so he
10 was still on probation and he was going to get let
11 go because he wasn't getting it.
12 And what he wasn't getting was summed up
13 by his supervisor, whose name is Lillian. Lillian
14 used to ridicule him for his excessive friendliness
15 to the clients.
16 I'm not suggesting she was even implying
17 anything improper in his relationship with clients
18 in the sense of something sexual or anything like
19 that. He was too friendly to his clients. He
20 liked them too much.
21 This was a supervisor whose life -- and it
22 was a very successful life in Public Aid -- was
23 dedicated to the proposal that every welfare
24 applicant was a liar, a fraud, and a cheat.

1 I used to sit next to her a few years ago
2 and I used to hate listening to her on the phone
3 when she was on the phone with a client because the
4 conversation would end with the words on a raising
5 inflection "I am the supervisor." Meaning you got
6 no place else to go buddy, this is it. I am the
7 supervisor.

8 And she prospered. She was promoted. She
9 was rewarded because she cancelled cases. This is
10 long before welfare reform. Because she produced
11 numbers that made her supervisors look good.

12 And that is the culture of this welfare
13 agency, and I have been in it for 15 years and I
14 suspect that of every major welfare agency
15 throughout the United States.

16 The administrator who I had to deal with
17 in trying to save Hector's job -- and we did save
18 his job, it took a long time. And in the meantime
19 he took a leave of absence because he was almost
20 going out of his mind with the stress.

21 The administrator at one point looked out
22 the window and said the state is the employer of
23 last resort. Nobody comes to work here unless they
24 have to. My mission is to weed out those

1 employees, no matter how long it takes. He never
2 defined what he meant by "those employees." I
3 think he meant all the employees.

4 And he is still there. He's still
5 pursuing his employees. And like most of his
6 colleagues, I suspect that he dreams of a future in
7 which he will be the manager in some privatized
8 enterprise. Because he is that very common, very
9 weird phenomena, the public medium level
10 administrator and hates public administration and
11 dreams of being a real manager in private
12 industry.

13 Some other speakers have referred to
14 Maximus (phonetic) in Wisconsin. I only had one
15 experience with them. I had to call a case worker
16 in Milwaukee once over a case where children had
17 actually been kidnapped. And it was a joke.

18 First of all, the case worker quotes
19 Maximus and I thought oh, privatization is here.
20 And without going into great detail, he was
21 arrogant. He didn't want to hear my position. He
22 didn't want to understand about policy.

23 At one point he tried to terminate the
24 conversation by saying, sir, I'm not here to

1 discuss federal law with you. I said we are
2 discussing food stamps, I think we have to talk
3 about federal law. And he told me that Maximus
4 isn't over the Food Stamp Program.

5 Maybe this was the light touch that we
6 heard about. It was like pulling teeth to find
7 out. I didn't know the number of the state food
8 stamp office. And then I talked to a worker who
9 actually knew what he was doing, and that was
10 okay.

11 But there is a fundamental hypocrisy in an
12 agency that has tried to convince us for years that
13 prices haven't risen since the middle 1970s.

14 And this touches on the issues of speaker
15 after speaker after speaker, and it's no easier to
16 listen to the second time. But in Illinois if
17 you're a single mother with one child you're
18 supposed to live on \$278 a month. That is cash.
19 If you're a single mother with two children you get
20 \$377.

21 Those have gone up about between \$10 and
22 \$15 since about 1977. The other grants didn't go
23 up at all. Three kids, you get 414.

24 So that generates an attitude amongst the

1 case workers. I mean, you either go crazy or get
2 like me or you buy into the system and you convince
3 yourself that people can live on this. And if they
4 have any other income, then they are lying and
5 cheating.

6 Well, I would say that the system has
7 really set it up pretty well that people have to
8 not report every single means of support that they
9 have because if they do, they are going to lose the
10 little that they get from the state.

11 And, of course, I think there has been
12 enough testimony the lack of failure to be linked.
13 That once you lose one thing you generally lose a
14 lot. At least for a period of time until you
15 reapply again.

16 And the speaker from Michigan who talked
17 about the policy "if in doubt, deny," absolutely.
18 And the system is set up like that, the computer is
19 set up like that, the physical case records is set
20 up like that.

21 We have -- you either become very hard in
22 this job or else you deal with the daily stress of
23 having to say no most of the time because that is
24 what that budgeting system forces us to do. It's

1 stressful day after day to justify unreasonable
2 economically brutal policies.

3 The worker who said to Dominic you are
4 getting the correct amount of food stamps. Well,
5 that worker is right. Legally he was getting the
6 correct amount of food stamps. I think he is now
7 getting the maximum amount a month.

8 I think we have another office, some
9 people have to travel 50 miles one way through the
10 suburbs. This isn't rural. Rural, I mean, we know
11 some people have to travel huge distances and I
12 don't think that is good. But in the suburbs a
13 mile is longer because there is more stop lights.
14 It's a long trip and public transport isn't good.

15 It was just admitted to us finally the
16 other day that caseloads in that office average a
17 thousand. That's all caseloads. That is including
18 the TANF caseloads. Some of the TANF caseloads are
19 quite small now.

20 The state average is 40 to 50 and that is
21 fact. You can't do anything with a thousand
22 cases. In Englewood local office, which is not
23 under my jurisdiction, but there was a situation
24 until recently you had 60 workers sharing a single

1 printer. Now, it's a food stamp error if you don't
2 have all the documents in the case records when you
3 finish the food stamp research.

4 So you think 60 workers, depending on
5 their productivity, they are going to do several
6 food stamp researches per worker per day and one
7 printer is going to back up. So there is no point
8 in getting them right after you get the work on the
9 computer to go check the printer for the paperwork
10 because it won't be there.

11 So you put it off. And then later on in
12 the day you deal with. The results are everyone
13 else has put it off. And how are you ever going to
14 marry all those printouts to the case where they
15 belong?

16 The emphasis on food stamp quality
17 emphasizes stuff like that. Emphasizes paper.

18 Stuff like this, these vision statements
19 about compassion are hypocrisy. And I think that
20 is a real serious problem that we have to work on.

21 By the way, I would like to say my
22 appreciation for the Hunger Coalition to alerting
23 me to this meeting, and also to the USDA.

24 Thank you.

1 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

2 Kathy Ross.

3 SISTER FALTER: Good afternoon. I'm Sister Pam
4 Falter. Jessica had to leave so I let her take my
5 turn.

6 You called my name. We are all with the
7 Illinois Hunger Coalition.

8 MS. WATKINS: We are calling them as we go
9 through.

10 SISTER PROBST: But we had to move people up
11 because of the time. We have been here since 2:00
12 o'clock.

13 MS. WATKINS: Well, we will try to get through
14 all of you.

15 SISTER PROBST: Because we signed up as a
16 delegation. We did not sign up as individuals.

17 MS. WATKINS: We are going to try to work
18 through it. Okay.

19 So you are who now?

20 SISTER FALTER: I'm Sister Pam Falter.

21 MS. WATKINS: And where is Kathy Ross?

22 SISTER FALTER: She's not here.

23 I am a case manager at Princess Finelli's
24 (phonetic) which is a not-for-profit agency here on

1 the west side of Chicago.

2 For the last nine years we have operated a
3 soup kitchen on the near northwest side where an
4 average of 170 individuals and families are served
5 an evening meal every day of the year.

6 At another site on the near west side our
7 overnight homeless shelter serves about 250
8 homeless men and women every night. Every evening
9 they are served a sandwich and a cup of soup, and
10 as they leave in the morning they are served coffee
11 and some type of breakfast food.

12 This may be the only food they eat until
13 they return in the evening, unless they find a soup
14 kitchen or have some other resources.

15 I have been working with the homeless for
16 the past four years as a case manager, and I
17 estimate that 60 to 70 percent of the homeless that
18 I see daily suffer from many forms of mental
19 illness. Therefore, I work with a very fragile
20 population.

21 It takes a long time for people to admit
22 their illness and take positive steps to care for
23 themselves. This denial runs very deep.

24 I have an example of a woman who was in

1 denial of her mental illness. Several months ago I
2 noticed Julie, one of our regular shelter guests,
3 was eating very quickly. As soon as she walked in
4 the room before she even sat down. Every time she
5 was very hungry.

6 So I inquired about it and I learned that
7 she had not eaten since 6:30 that morning when she
8 left the shelter and it was already 8:00 p.m. Then
9 for three days she had eaten very little, since the
10 soup kitchens that were within walking distance
11 were only open on certain days.

12 I learned that she had tried to get food
13 stamps, but was denied and I'm not sure why. But
14 the next day I went with her to the IDHS office to
15 apply for food stamps, so that she would have
16 something on those days when she couldn't get to
17 the soup kitchen. And she qualified without a
18 problem and I didn't see why she didn't get them
19 before, and her food stamps came within a week.

20 For a few months Julie stayed in another
21 shelter and her Link card, which is the food stamp
22 card here in Illinois, became inactivated somehow.

23 She returned to our place and told me that
24 and she also showed me her police report saying

1 that her wallet was stolen, all of her ID including
2 her Link card, the food stamp card was stolen very
3 recently.

4 So the next day I called the IDHS office
5 and they said that all she needed to bring to the
6 office was her police report, her Social Security
7 print out and a shelter letter. So she did, and
8 when she went back to the office, this time by
9 herself, she was told that no new Link card could
10 be issued her unless she had a picture ID.

11 This caused another hurdle because she
12 needed to refile for her birth certificate which
13 was out of state. So she had to wait several weeks
14 for that.

15 This is only one example of the
16 difficulties that the homeless face when they try
17 to apply for food stamps. Without a case worker
18 with them, the homeless are often told that they do
19 not qualify even before their file is open. I've
20 heard this from several folks.

21 Many of the homeless have great difficulty
22 with social and communication skills. This
23 prohibits them from expressing their needs. They
24 may have a great fear of authority. Many times

1 with reason.

2 If they had food stamp or the Illinois
3 Link card and there were problems, such as the
4 number coming up zero dollars, they just give up
5 and don't understand and give up and not follow
6 through on their problems. Unless they share their
7 story or problem with a case manager that might be
8 able to call.

9 In fact, just yesterday or a couple days
10 ago I had a client, it says zero and he didn't know
11 what to do. So I called up the 800 number, but he
12 didn't figure out how to do that by himself.

13 As with the case of Julie and many other
14 homeless people, they do not have a place to store
15 their records and often their records get lost or
16 stolen.

17 The homeless burn many calories walking
18 much of the day, and their bodies don't get
19 replenished with the proper nutrition. Also, when
20 they're discharged from the hospital with
21 medication, many times they are instructed to take
22 the meds with food. Without food stamps to get
23 food, the medication is not taken properly and they
24 might end up in the hospital again. This adds more

1 stress to their already fragile being.

2 Another way of saying that is inadequate
3 food plus inadequate or inconsistent medication
4 equals increased instability and increased
5 complication of their illness. And food stamps for
6 the homeless is about 125 a month, but a couple of
7 days in the hospital is over \$10,000.

8 Barriers are too great for the homeless
9 who are mentally ill to apply for food stamps.

10 First of all, if the case is already on
11 file, why do papers need to be resubmitted if they
12 lost the papers or they were stolen if nothing in
13 their lives has changed?

14 If I lost my Master Card or Visa, all I
15 need to do is call a number and it's reissued. Why
16 can't that happen with food stamps for people that
17 already have it?

18 I recommend more time is needed with the
19 clients who are mentally ill or low intelligence
20 because more explanation of their benefits is
21 needed and time is needed to repeat. A level of
22 trust needs to be established.

23 Food stamp application policies for the
24 homeless need to be simplified and more training of

1 all the case workers on how to work with the
2 homeless and with those who suffer mental illness.

3 I agree with the gentleman who just called
4 in that more word needs to get out on how to do it
5 and where to go, at least at shelters. There is no
6 doubt from my perspective that the homeless
7 population are sometimes discriminated against when
8 they try to apply for food stamps.

9 Thank you.

10 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

11 Sister Connie Probst.

12 SISTER PROBST: My name is again Sister Connie
13 Probst. I am the community organizer with the
14 Illinois Hunger Coalition. We are a statewide
15 agency, but I basically cover northeast Illinois,
16 which includes Chicago, Cook County and the collar
17 counties. So I cover a large range of folks and
18 deal with a lot of soup kitchens, pantries, and
19 anyone who is dealing with food, whether it be in
20 the school or otherwise.

21 This past June we collaborated with the
22 Chicago Anti-hunger Federation, which is a food
23 bank here in Chicago which serves over 200 agencies
24 to provide them with food.

1 What we did was out of their 200 agencies,
2 72 agencies were consistently served from '96 to
3 2000. From this data we took from the month of
4 February of '96 to February of 2000.

5 Those agencies all saw a 30 percent or
6 more increase of the number of people they were
7 serving. More than 50 percent of these people were
8 children under 18. The largest increase that the
9 people in those agencies received were the working
10 poor families.

11 Then we took the data -- and I will
12 provide you the information of all the IDHS offices
13 in northeast Illinois -- and what we saw there was
14 a decrease of participation in the Food Stamp
15 Program in the State of Illinois from April of '96
16 to April of 2000. There was a 27 percent
17 decrease. In Cook County it was 29 percent.

18 So there is a definite correlation between
19 the decrease in the food stamps and the increase in
20 the food pantries.

21 But we who are advocates of the Food Stamp
22 Program see that the Food Stamp Program can provide
23 more than two-thirds of a month for their
24 nutrition, whereas food pantries can only provide

1 them, as they tell me, a good four days of food.
2 Or \$100 more worth of food, if they have estimated
3 it.

4 Yet most of these pantries, soup
5 kitchens -- the soup kitchen you can come in every
6 day if you are close to one. But the pantries will
7 only allow to you return once a month. That is, if
8 they are adequately stocked.

9 One pantry here in Chicago told me they
10 had to cut down their participation because they
11 were having to serve 500 families a month and they
12 couldn't do it financially. So they had to only
13 see a family once every other month.

14 Last year at the Illinois State Fair we
15 manned -- I shouldn't say we manned. We were in
16 the booth with the Governor's booth, and the most
17 handed out information was food stamps for
18 farmers. That was our number one item of
19 information that was asked for.

20 This morning I spoke with my dad who is a
21 third generation farmer whose sons are now farming
22 over a thousand acres every year. He is very
23 adamant, and if he had known sooner he would have
24 been here himself this afternoon to say that how

1 much he felt it was a crime that a farmer who can
2 feed 200 families a day and this country cannot
3 provide enough food for the people in this country
4 alone.

5 The research for my family members alone
6 is saying that 10,000 farmers will lose their farms
7 this year because of economy. They will be humbly
8 going and applying for food assistance in IDHS
9 offices. There is no reason that they, who can
10 supply the food, have to go to an IDHS office.

11 The Illinois Hunger Coalition, because of
12 our hunger hot line, we also have been giving out a
13 major number of flyers and posters to pantries and
14 soup kitchens to increase the number of people on
15 the Food Stamp Program.

16 We do pre-screening of the Food Stamp
17 Program and tell people we will screen, asking the
18 same questions that IDHS does and estimate what
19 they qualify for. Also, we tell them, inform them
20 of all the documentation they have to bring in to
21 cut down the time that they have got to go back to
22 those offices.

23 Two people who were planning to be here
24 this afternoon, one was a Latino woman who said to

1 me I was refused a translator by a supervisor. I
2 would not have food stamps today if I had not filed
3 a suit against the state because of being
4 discriminated against. When I went to the office
5 again, she said, I had no further trouble.

6 Kathy Ross who you mentioned earlier, for
7 some reason because she works with northwest Cook
8 County homeless people, which is over 700 people on
9 a daily basis, says that homeless are told by the
10 offices that they do not qualify for food stamps
11 because they do not have a permanent address.
12 Until the warming shelters are closed at the end of
13 April, then they can come into the IDHS offices and
14 they can qualify.

15 The other thing with that they can open
16 their case in Schaumburg. Just open the case.
17 Then they have to come into the city, which is a 50
18 mile round trip on public transportation, to
19 finalize their case. Most of the homeless in
20 northwest Cook County do not come into the city
21 because they do not have the money to pay for the
22 transportation.

23 Thank you.

24 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

1 Jane Avery Doswell.

2 MS. DOSWELL: Hello. My name is Jane Avery
3 Doswell, and I kind of feel like the last Mohican.
4 I think I am the only person from the great state
5 of Indiana to be here, and I'm the executive
6 director of Community Harvest Food Bank of
7 Northeast Indiana. We cover the nine northeastern
8 counties there.

9 I care about this issue. I drove 170
10 miles today to get here and I will drive another
11 170 miles to get back, but it's a nice drive so I
12 don't mind. I think -- you know, you hear a lot
13 here, and you people are enormously patient.

14 What is really needed -- and I appreciate
15 you saying we lead the way, and clearly food banks
16 are a huge portion of that coalition that is needed
17 and the forming of the private and public
18 partnerships that it takes to feed everybody. And
19 I don't think it's just the government's job. I
20 think feeding people is everyone's job because we
21 are all human and that is the way we should look at
22 it.

23 As the food bank director from a part of
24 the country where we were extremely lucky to have

1 a lot of food produced, we have very generous
2 people who donate money. We are a completely
3 private charity. We don't rely on government
4 assistance. We are not part of a church. We are
5 not even part of the United Way. I really have it
6 better than a lot of folks.

7 But what we have seen, we service 560
8 agencies in the nine countries that we serve. And
9 what I want you to know is since welfare reform was
10 signed in, the good news, bad news part is the good
11 news is we have expanded our service. The bad news
12 is there has been such a reason to have to do
13 that.

14 Kids Cafe program is something through
15 America's Second Harvest which we are very proud to
16 be affiliated with. It's either before school or
17 after school nutrition program.

18 Three years ago we had two Cafes. We are
19 just now, thanks to some funding through America's
20 Second Harvest, going to be opening our 13th and
21 14th Kids Cafes. And then we have three more that
22 are coming open, providing free meals to latchkey
23 kids, this kind of thing.

24 We have a farm wagon program which my

1 colleague from Grand Rapids who called in, I was
2 glad to hear him, we get excess produce and we take
3 it in a very beautifully painted and pretty
4 beverage truck I will call it, into the inner city
5 and low income areas, throw open the sides and let
6 people coming and get their produce.

7 Because when you're on food stamps, the
8 first thing you'll hear from somebody, or any type
9 of public assistance, you can't stretch produce.
10 It's not like macaroni, you can add and stretch.
11 It's hard to stretch an orange. You got what you
12 got and that's it.

13 We go in there and it really helps a lot
14 so they can use their food stamps for the other
15 things that aren't quite as expensive. But boy, do
16 they appreciate that produce.

17 We also have a program called senior
18 pack. It delivers a bag of groceries every other
19 week, 20 to 25 pounds to homebound older adults
20 that are living on a fixed income. That program
21 had 300 people on it. Now it has over 600.

22 The good news part of that is, we have
23 expanded in more areas. But the bad news is we
24 could probably at least quadruple that if we could

1 afford it, but we can't.

2 Another thing we have got going is a
3 community cupboard which we were proud to invest,
4 if you will, at our food bank. And that is working
5 with organizations like Catholic Charities, AIDS
6 Task Force, Cancer Services, people who have
7 clients who are on food stamps and can't make it.
8 Or maybe aren't eligible for public assistance
9 because they do own a vehicle or something like
10 that.

11 And they try to help them by giving them
12 money vouchers. We have opened this community
13 cupboard which allows those agencies to refer their
14 clients to us with pound vouchers for food. So
15 that that not only gets food into hungry people,
16 but stretches the dollars that those agencies then
17 have to make available to other people.

18 Food stamps are a critical piece of the
19 puzzle in curing hunger in this country or ending
20 hunger in this country. And again, I applaud the
21 efforts of the USDA and I'm glad we have a
22 partnership like we do working at our facility so
23 that together we can take care of these issues.

24 But we really do have a problem. It's

1 increasing. And we do need to really, like, you
2 know when you were a kid and you played red rover,
3 red rover and the big kid was coming and you
4 doubled up. This is the time. The public
5 partners, private partners, we need to double up so
6 when that big kid comes we can hold them back.

7 We need to achieve the following goals:

8 We do need to increase that income level.

9 And I have a deal for you. I'm saying 130, 150
10 percent. You have been hearing 185, so I am
11 offering you a deal here.

12 Also, increase the asset level to at least
13 \$5000 per household. Change the program
14 calculation to use the Moderate Food Plan rather
15 than the Thrifty Food Plan, and increase the
16 minimum allotment from 10 to at least \$20 per month
17 and exempt that vehicle.

18 In Indiana, Fort Wayne where I'm coming
19 from, we've got a great town, but our public
20 transportation system is just virtually
21 nonexistent. If people are going to get to work
22 they've got to get there somehow. So if they have
23 a car, I suggest you let them have that and go to
24 work.

1 To improve access and to simplify the
2 program, the Food Stamp Program, by reducing the
3 application length and process. And I worked food
4 stamps my first job out of college. I know what
5 that's like. You know.

6 Utilizing a standard deduction to decrease
7 verification requirements. Reinstating legal
8 immigrants to eligibility for foods stamp is very,
9 very important.

10 Funding and encouraging education
11 programs, like John mentioned, too, and making
12 things simple and outstationing food stamp
13 application sites. And I would be willing to state
14 my food bank and a number of other food pantries
15 that we serve would be more than glad to volunteer
16 to do that and I know what I'm volunteering for.

17 And last but not least, and I don't know
18 how you do this because it's really hard, but if
19 there was a way to get rid of that stigma. That's
20 going to be a top down, bottom up, coming at all
21 sides kind of issue I know.

22 It's hard. It's not good for the worker
23 and it's not good for the recipients. So I think
24 we would all be better off to try to work on that

1 issue.

2 Thank you very much.

3 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

4 Lou Murray.

5 MR. MURRAY: Good afternoon. It's still
6 afternoon. I'm from the great state of Michigan
7 and great city of Detroit. I'm the chairman of the
8 Detroit Food Security Council, and I'm also with
9 the largest Medicaid provider in the State of
10 Michigan, which is the Wellness Plan.

11 Excuse me. I have asthma so sometimes I
12 get a little choked up.

13 I looked at three possible solutions. And
14 when I was sitting down here, I heard people talk
15 about health care and I heard them talk about food
16 so I'm offering three possible solutions.

17 One is to look at integrating food and
18 health care. Because when you look at health care
19 for the poor and you look at food for the poor,
20 right now it's disjointed. And you have Medicaid
21 and you have child care in one corner, and you have
22 food and food stamps and WIC in the other corner.
23 And as you know, most states are converting over to
24 the EBT system. And basically it's going to

1 integrate through the card.

2 And we were talking out in the lobby that

3 there is going to be about 1200 pieces of

4 information that you can put on a computer chip

5 with your food card. And some of that information

6 will be health care related.

7 An EBT system, electronic benefit system,

8 is going to integrate health care and also

9 integrate food. It's going to start out, you know,

10 as foods stamps, but eventually bringing in the

11 Medicaid. And with it integrated to run, it's

12 going to be a more efficient system. Since we are

13 going to do that anyway, it's going to be

14 electronic integrated with the card.

15 And too, we are going to cut the cost. We

16 put a WIC service in our medical center and we cut

17 our infant mortality almost in half. And we found

18 that people coming in for food we used to treat

19 them for health care. And if they come for health

20 care, you can also refer them over to the food.

21 So I think that health care for the poor

22 and also food for the poor should be integrated

23 into the EBT card.

24 The other thing, that full security

1 council. I think we ought to push funding for a
2 full security council. We as a community need to
3 learn how to organize ourselves so that we can take
4 care of our community. Because even if you
5 increase the food staff numbers, where are you
6 going to go to get food?

7 Now, Detroit is like all urban cities I
8 presume in that you can get liquor, you can get
9 tobacco, but where are you going to get wholesome
10 food? We can't get wholesome food. You can't get
11 fresh meat. And produce is out of the question.

12 So I think we need to develop food
13 security councils and help the community solve its
14 own problem.

15 So if we can create food co-ops within our
16 neighborhood. Right now we're working with public
17 housing and we are putting food co-ops within the
18 public housing unit. Why, because they can't get
19 produce. They have to create their own.

20 Another thing we are looking at is
21 bringing in the limited resource farmers. The
22 farmers, as the lady said earlier, are dying. The
23 small family farmers are a dying breed. They are
24 losing their lands. And on the other hand, we have

1 urban cities who can't get fresh vegetables and
2 produce.

3 If we can manage the two like we do in
4 Detroit, we can do direct marketing to the food
5 co-ops that will be community owned and we can get
6 fresh vegetables and fresh food into our urban
7 cities, at the same time save our limited resource
8 problems.

9 Because the black farmer has went from 14
10 percent of farmers to less than 1 percent. In the
11 next five years there won't be any black farmers.
12 We don't link them into the urban market and open
13 up the market for the black farmers and the family
14 farmers, there won't be any in the next five
15 years.

16 So again, my solution is first you
17 increase the food security council so the community
18 can control their own destinies, include the black
19 farmers in the farmers market, and certify them to
20 accept food stamps. And last but not least,
21 integrate food for the poor and health care for the
22 poor through the electronic medical system.

23 Thank you.

24 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

1 Joel Potts.

2 MR. POTTS: Good afternoon. My name is Joel
3 Potts. I'm primarily responsible for the
4 development and implementation of the Ohio's
5 Welfare Reform Program. I work for the newly
6 developed or designed Department of Job and Family
7 Services.

8 I really want to thank you very sincerely
9 Under Secretary, members of the panel, for a
10 variety of reasons. And also I should mention your
11 regional staff who does tremendous work. They are
12 very, very supportive.

13 I appreciate your willingness to come out
14 and listen to all of us, to go out in the
15 community. I think it's been one of the real
16 frustrations with the development of welfare
17 reform. That there were select few that were able
18 to negotiate their way into the inner beltway in
19 Washington D.C. A lot didn't feel they were heard
20 and I think it's wonderful for you to give us the
21 opportunity for everybody to be heard.

22 I also think that welfare reform,
23 historically there is nothing new. We have been
24 doing it now for over 60 years. Most of it has

1 been done anecdotally.

2 I also appreciate, as you all know as well
3 as we do at the state level and at the county
4 administrators level, there is nothing and no
5 program that we can bring up in the welfare reform
6 arena that gets quite the rise as foods stamps.
7 Everybody has an opinion on it and they're more
8 than happy to let you know what that opinion is.

9 And finally, the truth of the matter is we
10 are all in same boat regardless of whether it's at
11 the state level, local level or federal level.
12 Whether it's food pantries or sellers, we are all
13 dependent on the same individuals, and we need to
14 work together.

15 And if we are on the Titanic, it wouldn't
16 matter if you were in the front of the boat or back
17 of the boat, at the end of the day we would all end
18 up in the same place. So a very sincere thank you
19 for being here.

20 And I think that one of the things we
21 really need to recognize within a Food Stamp
22 Program and need to get across to Congress is that
23 there are a variety of different populations that
24 are dependent on this program, and a one size

1 system does not fit all.

2 We've got elderly populations, handicap
3 populations, children, working populations and
4 those who are recently detached from the
5 workforce. And their needs and the program
6 requirements need to reflect the ability of those
7 individuals to work within the system and not force
8 them to adhere to a system that is very
9 inflexible.

10 Welfare reform gave us that flexibility.
11 It allows us to create a multitude of different
12 programs to help those individuals. We are very
13 proud of the fact that in Ohio that starting this
14 year we will be spending the same amount of money
15 that we were in 1992 when our caseloads peaked.
16 But for the first time in Ohio's history we will be
17 spending more money on working poor populations to
18 keep them employed, help them retain and get better
19 jobs, than we will to provide assistance to people
20 who don't work.

21 And we would like to be able to add a
22 supportive Food Stamp Program to be able to
23 continue that.

24 The area that I think most administrators

1 will say that their biggest frustrations reside in
2 is in QC, quality control. I agree absolutely 100
3 percent that we need to make sure of the integrity
4 of the program, but I also think we need to decide
5 what it is exactly we're trying to focus on.

6 We are being told to be bold and be
7 creative. Get out there and do all these wonderful
8 things. And at the same time, be afraid, be very
9 afraid, because heaven forbid you give them three
10 extra dollars a month in food stamps because we are
11 going to get you. It's also very difficult for a
12 case worker to do outreach in a sanctioned world.
13 I think when we really bring this thing together,
14 we will be successful.

15 When I first started with our agency eight
16 years ago I said if nothing else, before I leave I
17 want to understand where is it we are going wrong.
18 What is it that is not working. How can we expend
19 billions and billions of dollars every year? How
20 can we be spending over \$10 billion a year in our
21 state and still have the tremendous need out there,
22 and the numbers of individuals talking about a
23 system that doesn't work for them.

24 After about six months it just hit me one

1 day. I said I think I've got it. It's because we
2 operate our systems just like algebra tests in high
3 school. If you get the test back and you look at
4 it and you have the right answer and what was
5 wrong, you got the question wrong, didn't get any
6 credit for it. Why? Because you didn't show all
7 the right steps. Later on in the test you get the
8 wrong answer, this time you got credit. Why is
9 that? Because this time you showed all those steps
10 and did you the right thing. Whether or not you
11 got the right result or not became secondary.

12 Public assistance programs unfortunately
13 historically in this country have been administered
14 the second way. We are very heavily processed
15 focused. The case workers are given these very
16 complex processes and told you have to do
17 everything absolutely right. And whether or not
18 someone gets served really has become lost in all
19 this. If you want to give us food and nutrition,
20 and I think everyone in this room thinks we should,
21 then let's start thinking about food and nutrition
22 and stop focusing so much on the process.

23 Thank you.

24 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

1 Anne Statham.

2 MS. STATHAM: Thank you for coming. This is a
3 great opportunity. I'm the statewide coordinator
4 of a group called the Women in Poverty Public
5 Education Initiative in Wisconsin, and we have been
6 working since 1994 to insure that the voices of
7 people who are effected by the changes that are now
8 rampant across the country are heard in the debates
9 and the policy decisions that are made about
10 welfare reform.

11 So we have a been -- we started working
12 somewhat before W2, the Wisconsin Works programs
13 came into being, and have been working to try to be
14 sure that the best possible thing can happen for
15 the people.

16 I'm also a faculty member of the
17 University of Wisconsin Parkside, which is a just a
18 little bit across the border. And of course we
19 started dealing with things before the Personal
20 Responsibility Act was passed, but in both the
21 State Bill and in the Federal Bill we were all
22 promised that as people were encouraged to become
23 engaged in the workforce the supports for working
24 families would remain and people would be supported

1 as we tried to do this.

2 And of course one of the most important
3 supports is the Food Stamp Program. And I'm sure
4 that you know the figures better than I do about
5 the fall off rates. I'm seeing what your figures
6 are federally and at the national level, and
7 Wisconsin has had a very sharp fall off take up
8 rate in all of these programs. Food stamp in
9 particular.

10 And I know that there have been some
11 efforts to figure out why this is the case, where
12 are the people who are eligible for receiving food
13 stamps. And I know that there was a survey in my
14 own home county that was done by the W2
15 administrators, and they found out the most common
16 reason people who were eligible were no longer
17 receiving food stamps is because they thought they
18 were no longer eligible for food stamps because
19 they were not receiving cash assistance from the W2
20 systems.

21 So I think Wisconsin might be really a
22 special situation where we went to almost
23 practically 100 percent work involvement in our
24 caseload and we have some counties where we have no

1 one in the county receiving cash assistance.

2 So it seems to me and many who are
3 watching this and experiencing this that there was
4 a detaching of welfare, AFDC or WT or TANF or
5 whatever we call it in this particular state and
6 programs like food stamps and medical assistance
7 and so on, but that hasn't happened in the way the
8 client received them.

9 So they still go to the same person. And
10 if they are told they are not eligible for cash
11 assistance, then they assume they are no longer
12 eligible for those other things also. And in
13 Wisconsin we have a stated administrative policy
14 that is called the light touch approach, where the
15 stated philosophy is if people don't ask about a
16 service, that the case worker is not to offer or
17 not to tell them.

18 So we have clients who are used to going
19 into a system where they are sort of listed
20 everything they are eligible for, now are expected
21 to ask for things if they need them. So they are
22 not being offered, they are not being told that
23 they still might be eligible.

24 So it seems that one of the biggest

1 barriers in Wisconsin is that people simply aren't
2 being informed of this. And the state at this
3 point doesn't seem to be making a really concerted
4 effort to find those people who used to be
5 receiving food stamps and AFDC and that sort of
6 thing.

7 So it seems like it would be useful for
8 states to make some concerted effort to find those
9 people and to inform them.

10 I notice here -- I live just across the
11 border and I see public service announcements from
12 the State of Illinois on TV. Hear them on the
13 radio informing them of this. And it seems like
14 that would be an useful thing that even the federal
15 government could do just to try to generally inform
16 people, make a real effort to let people know that
17 they are still eligible.

18 Sometimes we find that case workers give
19 the wrong information. Sometimes people are told
20 that they are not eligible when they really are.
21 Some of the people working in the system are
22 confused.

23 It was a very confusing situation going
24 from AFDC to W2. There was a lot of confusion on

1 the part of the client, there was a lot of
2 confusion on the part of the people working in the
3 system, and I think this is one of the things that
4 fell through the cracks. It's a very serious
5 thing. Obviously we are all concerned about food
6 security and so on.

7 Another real important thing that seems to
8 be that we have observed happening is the
9 non-English speaking population, that there doesn't
10 seem especially to be a real concerted efforts to
11 let them know in the language that they speak.

12 And in our state we have a very large Mung
13 population in some of our cities, Eau Claire,
14 Milwaukee, LaCrosse and some other places as well.
15 So in addition, too, they are not really getting
16 the information in a way that they can understand
17 it.

18 Something else that has been mentioned is
19 the cumbersome process whereas in some places
20 Milwaukee may be administering some of this and the
21 regional offices are administering the rest of it.
22 So people go one place and do part of the process
23 and they end up having to go to four or five
24 different places. Some people are walking to all

1 of this.

2 So it seems like the system could be
3 streamlined for ease of accessibility for people to
4 get out of it and for both to do the application
5 process and the number of times where they have to
6 be recertified. Especially in those kinds of
7 situations that becomes very cumbersome.

8 Now, one of the things that the people
9 running the agency say to us is that well, a lot of
10 these people are probably only eligible for about
11 \$10 a month and they just figure it's not worth
12 their while.

13 But we don't really know that. We don't
14 really know if that is the case or if that is the
15 decision that people are making. Those seem to be
16 estimates.

17 So it seems just to make some kind of
18 effort to see where the people went, who they are,
19 try to get in touch with them, and how much
20 benefits are they really losing would be really
21 worthwhile.

22 And I think especially if people have been
23 improperly informed that they are no longer
24 eligible, to try to get back into the system would

1 be a really good emphasis.

2 MS. WATKINS: Thank you.

3 I believe that's the last one we have? Is
4 that it?

5 Well, let me thank all of you for coming
6 here this afternoon and sharing your thoughts with
7 us. And for those of you who stayed since 1:00
8 o'clock until the end, we certainly appreciate
9 you.

10 I always learn an awful lot as I listen to
11 these conversations around the country, and in many
12 instances I am torn because of some of the
13 heart-rending stories that we hear.

14 We, Julie and Ted and the other
15 administrators and senior leaders, know that we are
16 going to have to make some positive changes so that
17 the program can continue to be available to those
18 people who are most in need.

19 We can only be successful in making these
20 changes with the input, what you're providing to
21 us, and that we are able to get from you.

22 As we said earlier, the oral comments that
23 you made today can be followed up with written
24 comments, and I would encourage you to let other

1 people know that they will still have time until
2 first wave of comments are due by the end of
3 August.

4 And I'm sure we will have many other
5 opportunities to chat with you and other people
6 around the country as we move through this process
7 and look forward to reauthorization of the Food
8 Stamp Program in 2002.

9 It's lot of work to be done and we
10 appreciate all the comments that you made today and
11 all of the hard work that you did.

12 It was a lot of hard work and a lot of
13 people that go into making a program of this
14 magnitude work.

15 Congress was right when they made sure
16 that this program remained a federal program, a
17 National program. They are right.

18 We have to make it work and make sure that
19 it works right for the people who most deserve the
20 program and who are most in need of the program.

21 Again, let me thank all of you and I look
22 forward to hearing from you and visiting with many
23 of you as we move through this process. Thank you
24 very much.

1 Again, thanks to the staff for doing such
2 a super job. Thank you.

3 MR. BELL: That basically wraps it up. We do
4 want to thank Catholic Charities and appreciate
5 their hosting here and we accept the challenge that
6 you put before us.

7 So thank you very much.

8 (Whereupon, the meeting was adjourned.)

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1 STATE OF ILLINOIS)
2) SS:
3 COUNTY OF C O O K)
4
5 April T. Hansen, being first duly sworn,
6 on oath says that she is a court reporter doing
7 business in the City of Chicago; and that she
8 reported in shorthand the proceedings of said
9 meeting, and that the foregoing is a true and
10 correct transcript of her shorthand notes so taken
11 as aforesaid, and contains the excerpt of
12 proceedings given at said meeting.
13
14 _____
15 Certified Shorthand Reporter
16
17 SUBSCRIBED AND SWORN TO
18 before me this_____day
19 of_____2000.
20
21
22 _____
23 Notary Public
24

